HISTORY and the IMAGINATION

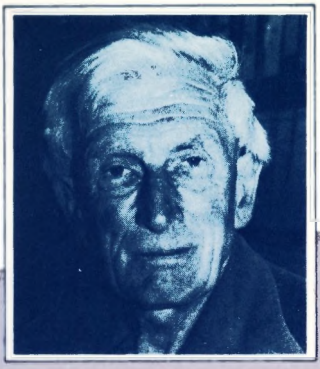
SELECTED WRITINGS of A.L. MORTON

Introduced by

Christopher Hill & Raphael Samuel

Edited by

Margot Heinemann & Willie Thompson



A.L. Morton was born in Suffolk in 1903; he studied at Cambridge and later taught at A.S. Neil's progressive school, Summerhill. His numerous books include a study of seventeenth-century antinomianism, *The World of the Ranters*, a path-breaking survey of visionary writing, *The English Utopia*, and, as editor, *Freedom in Arms: A Selection of Leveller Writing*. He died at his home in Clare, Suffolk, in 1987.

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History and the Imagination

Selected Writings of A.L. Morton

edited by Margot Heinemann
and Willie Thompson

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Editors' Preface

In July 1988 the 'Back to the Future' conference held to celebrate Leslie Morton's achievement and point to the continued relevance of his work attracted over 500 participants. As Eric Hobsbawm remarked, an event of that sort on such a scale would have been unimaginable thirty years earlier; it marks the degree to which the Marxist approaches he helped to pioneer have been absorbed into historical consciousness.

But as well as being a people's historian, A.L. Morton was also an outstanding literary critic. Not that he himself would have separated the two fields, for in his approach they were blended together as social struggle and the imaginative expression and understanding of that struggle. His lifelong commitment to the Communist Party, which he joined in 1928, likewise expressed his sense of the relation between thought and action, revolutionary discourse and revolutionary practice.

Our aim in bringing out this volume is to make available again some of Leslie's shorter writings, now mostly out of print, which have appealed to readers whose primary interest is in culture as much as in history. After appreciations by Christopher Hill and Raphael Samuel, the core of the book is a reprint of *The Matter of Britain*, a collection chosen by Leslie himself and first published in 1966, which shows him examining the course of our history through the cultural tradition. The rest of the volume has been chosen by us from the wealth of his writings between the 1930s and 1980s. Space did not allow us to give a fully representative selection which would illustrate the development of his work. We have concentrated, therefore, on essays long enough to convey the full flavour and quality of his thinking and not so long as to unbalance the volume; and we have avoided as far as possible overlapping with books still in print, such as *The English Utopia*

and *The World of the Ranters*.

Much of Leslie's most attractive and vital work was in popularising historical and literary journalism, in the innumerable feature articles and reviews he contributed to the *Daily Worker*, the *Morning Star* and other papers over most of his writing life. We have regretfully had to exclude nearly all of these, which, though masterpieces of compression, were inevitably limited by space in their exploration of new ideas. However, the pieces on Naseby and *News from Nowhere* (both from the *Morning Star*) give some idea of their quality.

Given the restrictions of space, we have chosen among pieces which have best stood the test of time, where his assessments have been confirmed by later discussion and research. Like anybody else Leslie was capable of what may now look like mistaken judgments and erroneous conclusions, but considering the great changes and upheavals which took place over his lifetime in Marxist and Communist understanding of the world, surprisingly seldom.

Among seminal articles excluded as too long are 'Socialism in Britain' (1963); the definitive essays on the Levellers and on William Morris written as introductions to Morton's selections from their works; and the fascinating *The Hero as Genealogist*, an account of one of Leslie's more remote and eccentric ancestors. References to some of the material omitted will be found in the selective bibliography.

The selection from his writings before the end of the Second World War is drawn largely from the short book *Language of Men* (1945). Of particular interest too are the articles originally appearing in T.S. Eliot's *Criterion* and F.R. Leavis's *Scrutiny*. Both these editors were far removed from Marxism, yet they were willing at that point to engage in dialogue, and these pieces reveal something of the way in which that dialogue was carried on.

The material from the post-war decades has been arranged according to the date of the historical subject rather than the date of composition, as this seemed to give more sense of coherence. One article, however, which we felt fitted better into this section was the remarkable 'French Revolutionaries and English Democrats', first published in *Labour Monthly* in 1939. Readers familiar with Edward Thompson's *Making of the English Working Class* will appreciate what an astonishing anticipation the essay is of some of the essential themes of that historical classic.

The brief sketches of T.A. Jackson, Edgell Rickword and the folk-song collector A.L. Lloyd are included because each of these in different ways had an enduring influence on Leslie's outlook and cultural approach. The two concluding pieces, from the closing years of his life, show that the clarity of his thought was in no way dimmed by the years. His review of Noreen Branson's history of the Communist Party between 1927 and 1941 represents his assessment of the movement during the time of his own political maturation. The final item on Ireland, with its contemporary relevance and beautiful concluding quotation, is extracted from his last published writing, the pamphlet he wrote to commemorate the 1688 revolution for the 'Our History' series.

The handful of poems with which the book ends are taken from the slim collection he published in 1979 – 'all I wish to preserve' and all written between the two world wars or during the second. 'If I had to write them now,' he says there, 'they would doubtless be very different. As it is, they may stand as a record of the past and of the young man who is at the same time myself and someone at whom I can look back with a mixture of objectivity and wonder.'

Margot Heinemann
Willie Thompson

I Appreciations

The People's Historian

Christopher Hill

Raphael Samuel recently drew attention to the number of British Communist Party intellectuals in the 1930s whose first interest had been English literature – Edgell Rickword, Alick West, Douglas Garman, Jack Lindsay – and A.L. Morton. Morton worked with T.S. Eliot on the *Criterion* in the 1920s, and spoke – many years later – of the 'liberating experience' of reading *The Waste Land* then. Leslie never lost his fascination with English literature, and it stood him in good stead as a historian.

But *A People's History of England* is what won him fame. It is difficult to remember that before this was published in 1938 there was hardly any Marxist work on English history. There were many epigrams and insights hidden away in the writings of Marx and Engels, some of which were beginning to be translated into English. There was Bernstein's *Cromwell and Communism*, a study of the seventeenth-century Diggers, translated in 1930. The nineteenth-century English Marxist Belfort Bax had written about sixteenth century German history. But on England there was virtually nothing. The best liberal history was J.R. Green's *History of the English People* (published in four volumes between 1878 and 1880); G.M. Trevelyan's *Social History of England* was not published until 1944. Writing a complete history of England from a Marxist standpoint, with so little to base it on, was a daunting task

for anyone to undertake.

Morton had to construct his own framework, do his own research, construct and test his own hypotheses. It would have been an astonishing achievement for a whole team of historians. And of course if it had been written by a team of historians it would have lacked Morton's personal stamp. He was incapable of writing badly. He had a strong sense of the Englishness of our landscape and of our culture. To people who had been badly taught and so thought history was a boring subject his book offered something quite different, and it gave an alternative vision to those who had been brought up on Alfred and the cakes, Good Queen Bess and the sea-dogs of Devon, kings and their mistresses, prime ministers and their wars, British freedom slowly broadening down, painting the map red. *A People's History* gave us a foretaste and one of the best exemplars of history from below.

When the Historians' Group of the Communist Party came together after the Second World War its discussion – the most exciting and stimulating of any I have ever participated in, unforgettable – were dominated by two books: the *People's History* and Maurice Dobb's *Studies in the Development of Capitalism*. Dobb's more specialised work led us into the most controversial aspects of the English Revolution – its causes and consequences. *A People's History* gave us our broad framework; its free-ranging suggestions opened up an infinity of questions to think about, explore further, discuss. In 1946 Leslie was a mature 43; most of us were in our twenties and thirties – impatiently post-war young men and women in a hurry, some of us thinking we knew our own little corner better than Morton did. We were supposed to be discussing revision of *A People's History*, and we gave its author all sorts of what we thought useful advice on how he should rewrite his book. Leslie was infinitely patient, infinitely courteous; he listened tolerantly, not necessarily taking us all too seriously though far too nice to say so; gently reminding us from time to time what the audience was for which he had written, and what his objectives were. There is a seventeenth-century story about a man who said of the strawberry: 'Doubtless God could have made a better berry, but doubtless God never did.' Doubtless the members of our very lively group of Marxist historians could have pooled their wisdom to write a book some of whose formulations might have improved on Morton's. But doubtless

they never did. Nor is there any likelihood that the *People's History of England* will be replaced in the foreseeable future.

Just one example of Leslie's capacity to throw out far-reaching ideas: I was asked recently to talk about two of the centenaries that are being somewhat over-publicised this year – 1588 and 1688. I have been saying no to 1688, because it is so boring to go on saying 'on the one hand good, on the other hand bad'. But 1588 and 1688 sounded an interesting combination. Whilst I was hesitating I read Morton on 1588. 'The defeat of the Armada', he suggested, 'can best be understood as the first phase of the English revolution,' of which 1688 was the last. So there was my theme! That sort of stimulating, provocative insight – whether you agree with it or not – is one of the greatest strengths of *A People's History*. At first glance Leslie's statement sounds rather a crude over-simplification. But on reflection it makes us think again about what the defeat of the Armada meant in European and English politics. It was sent to end English support for the radical Dutch republic, a state unique in Europe, ruled by Protestant merchants. The future of religious and political liberty in Europe were at stake. The historian of printing, Elizabeth Eisenstein – no Marxist – has argued that freedom of the press in the Netherlands, and later in revolutionary England, was essential to the survival of the scientific revolution. So this is no hole-and-corner local matter. Queen Elizabeth, we know, was at best lukewarm towards the Dutch republic. She disliked anti-monarchical rebels, and continued negotiating with Spain until the Armada was already under way. She made a famous speech – after the Armada had been defeated; she graciously accepted the praise and the glory. But the heart of resistance to Spain came not from her but from a group of radicals in the Council – Leicester, Walsingham. The fighting was done by the sea-dogs, freelance, and by commandeered merchant vessels; the hastily improvised defence preparations, the bonfires to warn of the Armada's approach, depended on popular initiative and enthusiasm. The Armada was defeated by private enterprise with popular support rather than by the Elizabethan state, just as the sea-dogs, the privateers, the colonisers, the conquerors of Ireland, the great trading companies of James I's reign, the accumulators of capital, were all private entrepreneurs.

That is what Leslie meant. To see the defeat of the Armada as

'the first phase of the English Revolution' raises questions about the social composition of support for the Parliamentarian cause – long before the civil war; it makes us think about the nature of the English state in 1588 and what changes were necessary for it to become the powerful machine wielded by Oliver Cromwell in the 1650s and perfected after 1688 – the tercentenary which completes the century of the English Revolution. It makes us think about the long-term causes and consequences of that Revolution. It gives short shrift to those who think there was no English Revolution, or that it had no long-term causes.

I want to spend a little time on Morton's other historical writings, which some of you may know less well. What impresses me about them is their enormous range, revealing the spacious curiosity which lay behind the success of *A People's History*; and showing too Leslie's sheer joy in English literary creativity. *The English Utopia* (1952) starts from the medieval fantasy of *The Land of Cokaygne*, a country in which nobody shall work and everybody shall eat, drink and make love to their heart's content; but you get there only after wading through muck up to your neck, an experience more familiar to medieval serfs than to their lords. Morton has a powerful sense of the continuity of English life and of the struggles of Englishmen and women for a better society, even though some of their ideals were not always ideologically wholly admirable by textbook Marxist standards. Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, for instance, was written when he was 'defeated, a prisoner, sick perhaps', with a 'sense of failure and decay ... for his own life and his own cause'. 'Gravely, magnificently and unwittingly Malory pronounced' the 'funeral oration' on the feudal world that 'he valued and wished to revive', but which he knew 'was passing beyond recall'. Or Morton's praise for Sir Thomas More – a fierce persecutor of Protestants who thought for themselves, not as the church told them to. Morton emphasises More's powerful indictment in *Utopia* of class exploitation and the rule of the greedy rich, noting that it was written in Latin so that only the learned could read it. More said he would rather see *Utopia* burnt than translated for the common people to read. Morton celebrates the Tory Swift's denunciation of the bestialities of early capitalist Whig England (made secure by the revolution of 1688), whilst expressing only modified raptures for Defoe's contemporaneous eulogies of capitalism – though that

surely was objectively progressive, comrades, wasn't it? Leslie was no phrase-mongering simplifier.

The Matter of Britain (1966) is subtitled 'Essays in a Living Culture'. Morton's sense of the continuity of the lives and struggles of the English people again enables him to transcend ideological barriers. He wrote eloquently and sympathetically of men and women trapped in evil times but holding on to values which he respected. Such were the Tory-radical Brontës, on the frontier between the industrial West Riding and the ballad country of the Pennine moors; Charles Kingsley and the Christian socialists, whom some Marxists have mocked as humbugs; Ruskin, who 'began ... with the intention of condemning' the Paris Communards, since he disapproved of violence and still more of the destruction of Parisian art treasures of which the Communards were accused. But as he examined more closely, 'he saw on the one side heroism and self-sacrifice, and on the other nothing but bestial greed and bestial cruelty springing from guilty fear'. So Ruskin did not condemn the Communards. Morton is admirable on E.M. Forster's *Passage to India* and its vision of 'love the Beloved Republic' which can transcend differences of race, colour and sex. He quotes Forster's 'Democracy ... means ... understanding that other people are as real as oneself.' I quoted earlier Morton's tribute to the historical achievement of *The Waste Land*, whilst completely rejecting Eliot's later career 'as a high Tory and a central figure of the literary establishment'. Leslie was no liberal: he saw the barricades, but he appreciated that even enemies may have some admirable qualities. 'Everyone acts according to his lights,' as Lenin said of the girl who tried to assassinate him.

I conclude with *The World of the Ranters* (1970). The Ranters were seventeenth-century antinomians, way out on the fringes of radicalism in the English Revolution. They were not a sect, not an organized group, perhaps best described as a milieu. They discussed, in pubs, highly subversive ideas. They questioned the authenticity and authority of the Bible; they were sceptical about the existence of heaven and hell, of an after life with its rewards and punishments; they attacked a state church and any form of government, whether that of king, parliament or army. They had no use for the Protestant work ethic. They thought 'sin' existed only in men's imaginations. Perhaps it had been invented by the

ruling class to keep the lower orders in place? If there was no sin, there were no sexual restraints. Some Ranters advocated and practised free love; and their enemies made much of their alleged orgies. At the height of what used to be called 'the Puritan Revolution' the Ranters caused a great deal of alarm among the godly and the propertied, and they were soon suppressed. 'It is hardly to be doubted', wrote the economist Charles Davenant later in the century, 'but if the common people are once induced to lay aside religion they will quickly cast off all fear of their rulers.'

An academic in New Zealand has recently published a book which attacks Morton and myself on the subject of the Ranters (J.C. Davis, *Fear, Myth and History*, Cambridge 1986). Davis claims that the Ranters did not exist, except for two or three individuals; they were invented, or grossly exaggerated, by yellow-press propagandists in the early 1650s, abetted by early Quakers who wished to dissociate themselves from a radical fringe which they called Ranters. More offensively, Davis said that the Ranters had been re-invented as part of a plot by the Communist Party Historians' Group as a political model for twentieth-century use. (I caricature slightly, but not much.)

It is difficult to know where to start with this farrago of nonsense, but it contains an outrageous libel on Leslie Morton, who can no longer defend himself. In the last conversation I had with him he said he didn't think Davis worth answering, which would be true were it not that Davis has been taken seriously by some ill-informed reviewers, and by others politically motivated. But, firstly, I ceased to be a member of the CP Historians' Group thirteen years before Morton published on the Ranters, fifteen years before I published. We were a bit slow in carrying out our plot. Secondly, Davis has to admit that Norman Cohn, author of a book called *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1956) forestalled Morton in rediscovering the Ranters. So far from being a communist Cohn is (I suspect) at the opposite end of the political scale. Thirdly, who in their senses could possibly think Leslie Morton would recommend the Ranters as a suitable model for twentieth-century communists? In the first place, he was not that sort of crude propagandist; secondly, if he had done anything so foolish as to look for a seventeenth-century model to follow, I think he might have chosen the Leveller William Walwyn (and I might have chosen Winstanley the Digger – we disagreed slightly

in our preferences here). Neither of us could possibly have chosen the Ranters. Thirdly, what again about Norman Cohn? Did he perhaps invent the Ranters as part of a right-wing conspiracy to which Leslie Morton and I fell innocent victims? Or were we all three fellow conspirators in an unholy alliance? Finally, the evidence for the existence of the Ranters is quite considerable. Morton tracked them down in more than twenty counties. Bunyan and George Fox were both temporarily attracted by Ranter ideas, and said so. No doubt the CP Historians' Group invented Bunyan and Fox? Except to remove the slur on Morton's reputation Davis's book is not worth wasting time on.

What is worth our attention is what Morton said about the Ranters. He showed that their ideas, or ideas very similar to theirs, survived to influence William Blake. Morton was so impressed by analogies between Blake and the Ranter Abiezer Coppe that he suggested that Blake may have read Coppe. We note again Leslie's eye for continuities, continuities of fellowship and in struggle, his eye for the core of rationality in the irrational; and his sheer joy in the exuberant vitality of Coppe and Blake. He quotes Coppe on God's threats to the rich. 'Behold I (the Lord) come as a thief in the night, with my sword drawn in my hand, and like a thief as I am – I say deliver your purse, deliver sirrah! deliver or I'll cut thy throat.' 'The plague of God is in your purses, barns, houses, horses; a murrain will take your hogs (O ye fat swine of the earth) who shall shortly go to the knife.' 'Howl, howl, ye noble, ... howl ye rich men, for the miseries that are coming upon you.' It is the vigour, the energy of the prose, that delighted Leslie as it may well have delighted Blake. 'Energy is eternal delight.' But Morton gave historians yet another line to follow up here in tracing connections between Ranter ideas driven underground in the seventeenth-century reaction and Blake in the age of the French Revolution. English people, unknown and nameless, form the connecting link. But God the Highwayman is not, I think, a political figure that Morton or indeed the Historians' Group would necessarily recommend for imitation. On an earlier occasion I remarked that the title of *A People's History of England* sums up three things very dear to Leslie – people, history and England.

A Rebel and His Lineage

Raphael Samuel

Leslie Morton was a Communist of the old school, one of a small but remarkable band of middle- and upper-middle-class Bohemians who joined the party in the 1920s and became Communists for life.

He was, according to the editor of his *Festschrift*, 'a model Communist intellectual' – 'incapable of mystification', sharing his knowledge and 'active' in day-to-day party work (in 1940 he was briefly a full-time organiser). Orthodox in one sphere, he was a free spirit in another, enjoying a lifelong association with A.S. Neill's anarchist school at Summerhill (his wife Vivien was for a time a housemother there and Leslie himself an occasional master). In another domain entirely – that of avant-garde writing – he was one of Mr Eliot's young men on the *Criterion*.

For a man who, by conventional standards, was an extremist, Morton seemed surprisingly at peace not only with himself but also with the world. Tall, stooping and gentle, he was temperamentally averse to in-fighting. Historically his enthusiasms were antinomian, focusing on rebels and their causes.

But he was by no means deaf to voices from the other side. His splendid essay on the Brontës ('Genius on the Border') has a vertiginous sense of gentility on the slide, and shows an unexpected sympathy for High Toryism. 'The Matter of Britain', a study of Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* – chivalry as cloak for knightly despair – is no less finely honed to the pathos of feudal decadence.

For all his love of the past, Morton was a reluctant, or at any rate an accidental historian who in his younger days would rather

have been a poet. He joined the Communist Party not as a Cambridge student but as a freelance writer, supporting himself as a second-hand bookseller in Finsbury Park; he remained a writer in harness to the end of his days. 'They never had much money: whenever he had it, he used it to write.' He carried his writerly preoccupations into history, and his best work in history is literary criticism of a high order.

He cleaves to original texts, with little or no reference to secondary authorities, which is one reason why his books (with the exception of *A People's History*) scarcely date. He is alive to the cadences of thought – what he calls, in a pioneering essay on the seventeenth-century pamphleteers, 'the Leveller style'. Textual analysis – or what today might be called deconstruction – is the cornerstone of his work, and he uses it not only to decode individual writings but also to recover subterranean lineages. It is the method which produced one of his most original contributions to scholarship, *The Everlasting Gospel*, a study of the antinomian (especially Muggletonian) sources of Blake's prophetic books.

In the preface to one of his poems, written in the 1930s, Morton speaks of himself as 'half of the country, half of the town, and always uncertain'; the competing loyalties this set up is a major theme in his verse. But the pull of the country proved stronger and it was to be the very groundwork of his history. Preparing the materials for his *People's History* in 1937, and making a solitary walking tour to gather local colour, he made his pilgrimage not to the mill-towns of Lancashire and the West Riding, nor yet to the mining valleys of South Wales, but rather – like William Morris and Thomas Hardy before him – to the magical stones of Avebury and the tracks of the Icknield Way – the archaeological starting-point of his book.

To complete the history, he abandoned London, where he had been suffering writer's block, and returned to the family's farm in Suffolk (his father, though a Conservative, 'read every chapter as it was completed, and afforded much encouragement'). East Anglian by birth and origin, he was to make Suffolk his home for the rest of his days, and his seventeenth-century work, while never 'local' history, drew gratefully on local sources. Plough and pasture rather than shuttle and cage were the imaginative focus of his vision; the 'common people' of his narratives were not an industrial proletariat, nor yet – as in Cole and Postgate's

well-known history of that name – town-dwellers, but first and foremost a folk.

Enclosure rather than the industrial revolution was the central drama in his account of the rise of capitalism, and the English Civil War, rather than Labour's 'glorious march', the grand climacteric of class struggle – the time when the two-camp division of English society was most perfectly, and most movingly, realised.

Morton was an early follower of William Morris – 'the greatest of English socialists' he wrote of him in 1934 – and later edited two collections of his writings. Like Morris he practised his own version of Simple Life-ism, biking everywhere and making do with minimal means. By force of necessity as well as choice (he was always hard up), he lived in some sort as an exile from the modern world. His home was a twelfth-century chapel, bought in 1950 with the help of a small annuity. It was famous among visiting comrades for its cold. Like William Morris at the Red House, he found nothing he could bear to put in it. 'For a long time Leslie refused to let the place be desecrated by such modern inventions as a ... water heater, refrigerator or telephone.'

The house was still remarkably comfortless when I visited it last winter, with only a slow-burning fire in the grate – and a spread of Women's Institute cakes – to offset the January cold. One entered through a low Norman arch and found oneself entombed in wall upon wall of floor-to-ceiling books, his constant companions and – together with the Thomason Tracts at the British Museum – the substantial basis of his life's work. 'The library' was always the centrepiece in an old-time Communist home, for engineers and miners no less than schoolteachers and writers, but I have never seen a home in which the living inhabitants were so utterly dwarfed by books.

Like many historians (only more so), Morton was on comfortable terms with the past. His texts were household familiars and his best work emerged from prolonged meditation on their meaning. He had the imaginative sympathy to make sense of the most quirky historical character. He took their mysticism (if not their religion) seriously, and indeed in his account of their visionary imagining came close to projecting his own.

At the same time, a critical intelligence – Communism's famous 'realism', but seldom applied to the historical terrain – inhibited him from glamorising. His portraits, even the portraits of his

heroes, are typically anti-heroic; like his friend Christopher Hill, he is alive to the play of self-illusion and the gulf between intentionality and effect. Relaxed in face even of those he admires he does not fail to share his doubts with readers.

'A true hero, though perhaps not a very attractive one,' he writes of the seventeenth-century religious firebrand, Lodowick Muggleton; and of convert Laurence Clarkson, the archetypal 'seeker' to whom he devoted a moving chapter of *The World of the Ranters*, 'there was always an element of bombast and self-glorification in him, even when he was most sincere.'

As a reasoner, he is uneasy with the posturings of John Lilburne, the 'Freeborn John' of radical historiography. His sympathies are engaged rather by the 'still ... soft voice' of William Walwyn, the Leveller leader (in his account of him) whom the Grandees really feared – 'this quiet, well-read man in whom the mystic and the sceptic seemed to merge', a man who 'shunned publicity' and who argued from 'reason' rather than 'precedent'.

> In an age of rhetoric and hyperbole, when men engaged in the fiercest controversy, and claimed attention by trying to shout louder than their neighbours, there was one man who followed exactly the opposite course. He sought and secured attention by lowering his voice so that only the most careful and attentive reader could catch it.

Here, as elsewhere in Morton's work, one can see the ways in which history served as an enchanted space in which to celebrate the qualities which were inhibited or repressed in the present. In one aspect it was a kind of playground of the Communist unconscious, a place where libertarian impulses could free themselves of their disciplinarian integument. It is a supreme, though representative, irony that this most dedicated of party loyalists should have made his life's work the championing of free spirits against the persecuting orthodoxies of their time.

History was a release from the thraldom of the present. It allowed the Communist historian, tracing the progress of levelling and democratic opinions, to make those identifications with the 'common people' which, in a politics dominated by Conservatives or right-wing Labour leaders, was cruelly denied in the present; to take up arms (if only vicariously) in the case of liberty; to see the mighty, as in 1649, toppled from their thrones. Solidarity with the Levellers – 'farmers, tradesmen and artisans' as Morton designates

them, speaking of those in his native East Anglia – or with 'mechanick preachers' preaching naked Christ in the marketplace – was altogether less problematical than negotiating with the local Labour caucus, or pressing leaflets on the heedless crowd.

The historical detour was not Morton's alone. His *People's History of England* grew out of the 'common sense' of British Communism in the epoch of the Popular Front. It had indeed been suggested by Morton's fellow journalist (and fellow historian) at the *Daily Worker*, Allen Hutt, and it was in line with those 'March of History' pageants which the Communist Party was organising as part of its street demonstrations against fascism.

Like *A Handbook of Freedom* (1939), the work of his friends Edgell Rickword the poet and Jack Lindsay the writer, or for that matter the literary essays of his father-in-law, the printer-historian T.A. Jackson, it was an attempt to domesticate British Communism and discover its native roots. Originating in a directive of the Comintern, and the change of line in 1935 – from the politics of revolution to that of the 'broad democratic alliance' – it took on a life of its own, feeding on 'Little Englandism' and cultural nationalism and drawing on older traditions of religious and political dissent.

It was taken up in the 1940s by a new and brilliant generation of Marxist historians – among them Christopher Hill, Eric Hobsbawm and E.P. Thompson, who worked closely with Leslie in the Communist Party Historians Group – and it has therefore some claim to being the progenitor of today's flourishing schools of 'history from below'. Morton's almost Tory sense of lineage – his treatment of the past as a living present and his fascination with real or imagined predecessors (like other British Marxists he was convinced that Overton, the seventeenth-century pamphleteer, was a proto-Communist) has also become, in recent times, a typical theme of radical and alternative history.

Morton's other major preoccupation – his sustained engagement with radical mysticism – has proved more uncomfortable to follow and his 1952 book on the subject, *The English Utopia* – a surprising book to issue from a Communist press – remains unsurpassed. But the 'mechanick preachers' of nineteenth-century Britain are beginning to attract the attention of a new generation of socialist historians, while feminist historians are showing a new alertness to the para-religious elements in feminist thought.

Here, as elsewhere, Morton's work may turn out to be interesting, not so much for what it reflects or follows, as for what it anticipates.

II The Matter of Britain

The Matter of Britain

The Arthurian Cycle and the Development of Feudal Society

I Origins

When 'many noble and divers gentlemen of this realm of England came and demanded' of Caxton that he should print the history 'of the most renowned Christian king, first and chief of the three best Christians, and worthies, King Arthur, which ought to be most remembered among us before all other Christian kings', his first reaction was cautious. He replied that 'divers men hold opinion that there was no such Arthur and that all such books as be made of him be but fained and fables'. However, his patrons were insistent and reminded him of the evidence for Arthur's historical existence:

> First ye may see his sepulchre in the monastery of Glastonbury ... And in divers places of England many remembrances be yet of him and shall remain perpetually, and also of his knights; first in the abbey of Westminster, at Saint Edward's shrine, remaineth the print of his seal in red wax, in which is written PATRICIUS ARTHURUS BRITANNIE GALLIE GERMANIE DACIE IMPERATOR; item in the castle of Dover ye may see Gawain's skull and Cradok's mantle; at Winchester, the Round Table; in other places Lancelot's sword and many other things.[1]

We cannot be certain that this 'evidence' was any more

convincing to the hard-headed, businesslike printer than it is to us today. What it did and does prove was that a deep and wide tradition existed in the fifteenth century, and that Arthur was a hero in whom so general an interest existed that a book about him would certainly be profitable. And by some chance of which we know nothing Caxton had to hand a manuscript work by Sir Thomas Malory, of which a number of copies seem to have been in existence by 1488, suggesting that it had already won a certain acceptance.[2] This manuscript Caxton edited, and printed with the reservation that 'to give faith and believe that all is true that is contained herein, ye be at your liberty'.[3]

To this volume, *Le Morte Darthur*, we shall have to return as the final form which the Matter of Britain assumed in English. But it was the end of a long process in which a doubtfully historical figure of the dark ages was transformed into the centre of a vast body of romance, tradition and pseudo-history. The subject of this essay is not the Arthur of history, about whom in truth little can be known, but the history of this process. It will attempt to explain it in relation to the growth and decay of feudal society, to trace the main stages of growth of the Arthurian Cycle and to attempt to show why it took the forms which it did at these different stages.

About Arthur himself history can say little more than is contained in the *Chronicle* of William of Malmesbury, compiled about 1125. He writes:

> Ambrosius, the sole survivor of the Romans, who became monarch after Vortigern, quelled the presumptuous barbarians by the powerful aid of warlike Arthur. It is of this Arthur that the Britons fondly tell so many fables, even to the present day; a man worthy to be celebrated not by idle fictions, but by authentic history. He long upheld the sinking state, and roused the broken spirit of his countrymen to war. Finally, at the siege of Mount Badon, relying on an image of the Virgin, which he had affixed to his armour, he engaged nine hundred of the enemy, single-handed, and dispersed them with incredible slaughter.[4]

William was among the soundest of the early chroniclers, and what he tells us is consistent with the view of the most recent historians that Arthur was not a king but the chief of a freelance band of resistance fighters who formed a sort of flying column at the service of the British kings of the day. If we are correct in connecting Arthur with the battle at Mount Badon, he can be

placed with reasonable certainty as flourishing in the late fifth and early sixth centuries. What is apparent is that William of Malmesbury was acquainted not only with the chronicles of Gildas and Nennius but also with a body of traditional stories current in Wales and the south-west of England. Some of these traditions are still reflected in obscure fragments of early Welsh poetry, and there is reason to think that similar traditions, for which no literary evidence survives, circulated in Brittany and Cornwall. It is of such tradition that William gives evidence in his other reference to Arthur. Reporting the discovery of the supposed tomb of Walwin (Gawain) towards the end of the eleventh century, he adds: 'The sepulchre of Arthur is no where to be seen, whence ancient ballads fable that he is still to come.'[5]

About a decade after William's *Chronicle* the Arthurian Cycle emerged from the realm of folk-memory and passing references in the chronicles with the appearance of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Histories of the Kings of Britain*. Here Arthur appears at full length as a world-conquering monarch, with an elaborate court and surrounded by a band of champions. Gawain, Kay and Bedivere emerge from the shadows of Welsh gnomic verse into full-blown knighthood. Guinevere already has her traditional character of the faithless wife. Merlin is introduced, apparently for the first time. Both the birth and the passing of Arthur assume something like their final form.

Geoffrey's *Histories* was immediately and sustainedly popular, as is attested by the number of surviving manuscripts. Arthur became the fashion and within a couple of generations a whole romance cycle was coming into being, ousting the cycle of Charlemagne from general favour. Yet however popular Geoffrey's book may have been, this development would not have taken place but for very definite reasons, historical as well as social and literary.

In the fifty years or so before he wrote, the Norman-French penetration of Wales and also of Brittany had been going steadily forward. This was important for our subject in two ways. On the one hand, the Arthurian legend had been growing among the conquered, stimulating Welsh patriotism and providing it with the focus of a heroic past. There is very little evidence to suggest that the belief that he was not really dead, but was waiting for the time when he would return to deliver his people, had existed before the

age of conquest. On the other hand, this conquest brought the Norman-French aristocracy for the first time into contact with Arthurian legend, which could also be used, after suitable transformation, to serve the ends of the conquerors.

The Norman dynasty was a *parvenu* monarchy, only two generations old. William I had been a mere duke, to whom the stigma of the bastard of the tanner's daughter still clung. Yet this upstart dynasty now ruled not only over England but over much of France and all the easily accessible parts of Wales. It needed a myth, something comparable with what Virgil had done for the newly established Roman Empire or the Charlemagne Cycle for France. This myth Geoffrey supplied with his fabulous histories of the New Troy and his Normanised Arthur.

Geoffrey lived on the borders of Wales, and his immediate patrons were the Marcher barons who were carving out new lordships in this region. His *Histories* was dedicated to the most powerful of them all, Earl Robert of Gloucester, and, as a piece of political re-insurance, also to Robert's enemy, Stephen of Blois. There can be no doubt that he had a certain access to Welsh tradition. He may even have had, as he claimed, 'a certain most ancient book in the British language',[6] though no trace of such a book or anything like it has survived, and at best it could only have provided him with a small part of his material. He may also have known something of Cornish and Breton tradition, though these have entirely disappeared: it is reasonably certain that such tradition must have existed and both areas play a considerable part in his story. At any rate, he was in a most favourable situation to assimilate and transform all these traditions and to Normanise them. In this connection it is significant that while he cannot entirely ignore the popular belief in Arthur's miraculous survival, he discounts it as far as possible. It is indeed remarkable how this belief continually forces itself into the histories and romances against the will and judgement of the literate scribe. It was a hope of the depressed classes and subject peoples, and it is precisely in those versions which are closest in form and feeling to the people, like Layamon's *Brut*, that it is most emphasised. In this respect the contrast between Layamon, writing in English, and Wace, writing a little earlier in Norman-French, is most marked. The sleeping Arthur is one of a long series of dead heroes whose return is popularly expected, from Charlemagne and Barbarossa to the

Duke of Monmouth and Lord Edward Fitzgerald.[7] Ultimately the idea links both with Jewish-Christian millennarianism and the primitive myths of the buried and reviving fertility god. An interesting form of the latter was the story of Bran the Blessed, whose head guarded London, and with whom Arthur is connected in one of the early Welsh triads.

Arthur had a further advantage for the Normans, in that he was a pre-Saxon hero, whose traditional role was one of conflict with Saxon invaders. In the twelfth century the English were a far from reconciled majority of the population. Suitably transformed, therefore, Arthur was a safe figure for the Normans to build upon, in a way that, for example, Alfred could not have been. When, later, an Alfred myth began to grow, it had a marked bourgeois and anti-feudal bias.

In Brittany a somewhat similar situation existed. During the tenth century it had been invaded by the Normans, but succeeded in preserving its independence under a native duke till 1148, when the Plantagenet Geoffrey of Anjour renewed the attack. A second Geoffrey, son of Henry II of England, married Constance of Brittany, and there was a long struggle before he could establish his claim to the duchy. It was just at this time that the Arthurian legend was rapidly growing. Alain de Lille wrote, only slightly later:

> Go to the realms of Armorica, which is lesser Britain, and preach in the market-places and villages that Arthur the Briton is dead as other men are dead, and facts themselves will show you how true is Merlin's prophecy, which says that the ending of Arthur shall be doubtful. Hardly will you escape unscathed, without being whelmed by the curses or crushed by the stones of your hearers.[8]

It would be absurd, however popular Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Histories* may have been, to suppose that this alone was responsible for such feelings, though Alain is certainly writing some time after its appearance.

In 1187 Geoffrey and Constance had a son who was christened Arthur – an obvious attempt to placate Breton feeling, very much in the same way as Edward I tried to do later by creating *his* new-born son Prince of Wales. And only a couple of years after the birth of Arthur of Brittany the tomb of Arthur was most conveniently 'discovered' at the Abbey of Glastonbury,

henceforth to be identified with the Avalon to which, Geoffrey of Monmouth had said, Arthur had been carried to be healed of his wounds. Once more we can see the Norman-French ruling class trying to undermine the popular belief in Arthur's survival while retaining those features of the cult which suited their purposes – never with complete success.

Popular imagination was able to accept both tomb and survival, combining the really incompatible, as in a rhyme of the early fifteenth century:

> At Glastonbury in the choir,
> They made Arthur's tomb there,
> And wrote with Latin verses thus
> Hic jacit Arthurus, rex quondam, rexque futurus.[9]

One may guess that the monks of Glastonbury, who had already a first-class pilgrim attraction in the reputed shrine of Joseph of Arimathea, did little to discourage a belief that must have brought them considerable additional revenue. And later this fortuitous association of Arthur with Joseph may have helped to draw the originally independent Grail legend into the Arthurian cycle.

It is clear that this historical setting helped to foster the rapid growth of the tradition: for entirely different reasons it was most useful and acceptable both to Normans and to the Welsh and Bretons. But such factors, while explaining the rapid growth, are still not entirely sufficient to explain the particular and remarkably different forms which it assumed in France and in England.

II The Heroic and the Romance

The twelfth century marked a turning point in the social evolution of northern and western Europe. The Dark Ages, which, as W.P. Ker says, 'might more honourably be called, and not less correctly, the Heroic Age of the North', were passing into the age of fully developed feudal society. The time of migration and invasion was ended, and life, at least for the ruling class, became more secure, more comfortable and more sophisticated. This new, more courtly, ruling class was no longer content with the framework of ideas which is found in the heroic poetry of the past, in *Beowulf*, in *The Volsunga Saga* or in *The Battle of Maldon*. It needed a new ethic, a new standard of manners and conduct, and a new idea

expressing the sharpness of its separation from the masses whose life had altered much less.

In England, where the Norman Conquest only emphasised a separation of classes that was proceeding everywhere, the change can be illustrated by Bede's story of the poet Caedmon. Caedmon was a keeper of horses in the Abbey of Whitby. There it was customary in the evening for the harp to be passed round the hall, so that all in turn might sing to it. Caedmon had no ability for doing this and so,

> When he saw the instrument come towards him, he rose from the table and returned home. Having done so at a certain time, and gone out of the house where the entertainment was, to the stable, where he had to take care of the horses that night, he there composed himself to rest at the proper time.[10]

Bede goes on to tell us how an angel visited him and bestowed on him a gift of divine poetry. The interesting point is, however, that Caedmon, whose status was so humble that his sleeping place was in the stable, still had the right to sit in hall, and was expected to take his share in the common cultural life. This was in 680: it is perhaps difficult to picture such a situation in post-Alfredian England: it is quite impossible to imagine it after the Conquest, when the division of classes was reinforced by a barrier of language. The same sort of contrast is visible between the low, wooden, rambling and generally accessible houses of the Saxon nobility, and the horrifying stone keeps that spread not only over England but all north-western Europe in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

It was among this feudal ruling class, increasingly elevated and isolated from the masses of the population, that the ideas of chivalry developed as a social cement. The warrior was becoming a knight: war, which was its own justification in the Heroic Age, now began to need a cover of morality. So first, the kindred group of tribal society developed into the band of warriors attached by personal loyalty to the war leader. And the band itself may be regarded as a transitional form bridging the gap between the kindred group and the feudal lord with his vassals. As feudal society developed, war became progressively less important as a source of wealth in comparison with the systematic exploitation of serf labour, and a correspondingly changed attitude towards war

itself may be traced. The warrior fought for the sake of gain and needed no other excuse. The knight must at least appear to reconcile his warfare with the teachings of Christianity. So he must fight for justice, for honour, for his mistress or for Christendom. Such at least was the theory. As J.C.F. Hearnshaw wrote:

> Thus the distinctive qualities of the chivalric knight in the Golden Age of Chivalry were at their best honour, piety and love; at their worst ferocity, superstition and lust. The virtues of chivalry were courage, faith and devotion; its vices murder, intolerance, adultery.[11]

He adds, however, 'There was, in truth, no Golden Age of Chivalry.'[12]

This was the period of the crusades and of the foundation of the earlier, religious-military orders of knighthood. The Order of St John of Jerusalem, which assumed its military character about 1118, the date also of the founding of the Templars, was the earliest of these. The Teutonic Knights were founded about 1128 and transferred their operations early in the fourteenth century to the Baltic lands where their war on the heathen coincided most conveniently with the acquisition of new fiefs. Similar orders were created in Spain towards the end of the twelfth century.

It was in these centuries that the Arthurian Cycle was being shaped and repeatedly transformed, reflecting a shifting and complicated interrelation of old and new forces. For if feudalism was a new stage, it grew out of its immediate past and for long preserved elements derived from that past.

The Arthurian Cycle flowered after, but not long after, the ending of the Heroic Age. The old themes and modes of the North were exhausted but not entirely forgotten. Arthur, the voyager to the unknown, slayer of giants and dragons, carries something over into the new age – after all, he was a hero of the sixth century even if remodelled to suit the ideas of the twelfth. Yet he had to be remodelled. By the twelfth century the Heroic Age was over, feudal society obliterating with its sharp class divisions the relics of tribal life. With these came a division of culture, and the heroic epic with a universal appeal was replaced by romance, the writing of court poets and clerics for a leisured ruling class. It has been suggested that while epic was composed for men, romance was written largely for women.[13] The difference between the love of

Sigurd and Brynhild and of Lancelot and Guinevere reflects such a change.

Nevertheless the material for romance came from the Heroic Age. Just as the Norman-French world was leaving that age finally and irrevocably behind it, it came upon the treasure house of Welsh and Breton tradition which it plundered and exploited just as it did the Welsh and Breton lands. As W.P. Ker has said, the French Romance poets of the twelfth century were deliberately and professionally exploiting a vein and meeting a demand.[14] In this process much was destroyed – romance might almost be called heroic poetry run to seed. But to say this would be to leave much unsaid: the romance poets enriched and embellished as well as plundered and vulgarised.

For good or ill this process was most complete in France and in the romances written in French, from Wace and Chrétien de Troyes to the makers of the Arthurian prose cycle. Here a degree of sophistication was achieved which left nothing but confused traces of the heroic mode. In England the story was quite different. Heroic literature had flourished in the lands never Roman, or where the Roman tradition was weakest and least preserved: it was these northern and western lands which were plundered for the material of romance, but which also, naturally, preserved most tenaciously something of their old character. So, in England the character of the Arthurian tradition, while profoundly modernised, was never entirely changed. Here, too, a strong popular culture was preserved, as is witnessed by the reappearance of vernacular alliterative poetry from Layamon to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Langland. This culture reacted strongly upon the character of the Arthurian matter in England.

So, from the beginning, a quite sharp difference existed between the French and the English Arthurian tradition. The French romance poets and prose writers were interested in personality, in individual adventures embroidered for their own sake, in personal relations and the increasingly complex artificiality of courtly love. In England, the pseudo-historical basis which Geoffrey of Monmouth had given to the Arthurian matter was never lost, though constantly modified and elaborated by the French romance manner. And in addition to this, there is always an epic strain which the French stories entirely lack. The difference is shown

from the start by the contrast between Wace, writing in Norman-French, and Layamon, writing in English. Both derive directly from Geoffrey of Monmouth, but the difference between the courtly Wace and the popular and epic style of Layamon is immediately obvious.

For one thing, Layamon never forgets that Arthur is represented as a British and not a French king, a fact that to Wace would have been almost without meaning. While we cannot, of course, speak of a British or an English nation in the Middle Ages, it is possible to see quite early, earlier than in most European countries, the rise of what may be called proto-national feeling. As bourgeois production relations developed within feudal society, this feeling grew stronger, till by the time of Malory and Caxton it plays an important part in the life and thought of the country. The Arthurian matter in England both fed upon and nourished this growing national spirit.

One example of the difference between Wace and Layamon, the more sympathetic treatment given by the latter to the idea of Arthur's return, has been mentioned already. No less interesting is Layamon's elaboration of the story of the founding of the Round Table. The idea of the Round Table, though it is to be found in Welsh tradition, undoubtedly drew much from the new orders of chivalry, which were being created in the twelfth century. Yet, in other respects it resembled closely the *comitatus*, the war band of the king or chief of the pre-feudal Heroic Age. The French tradition emphasises the former aspect, so that it becomes the central feature of a sophisticated royal court, like those which were everywhere growing, and a starting-point for fantastic adventure. Layamon stresses the primitive features, such as are found in Welsh traditions, and his account of its origin out of a murderous brawl over the distribution of food has the true epic flavour:

> And the high-born men bare the meat even forth-right then to the knights; then towards the thanes, then towards the swains, then towards the porters, forth at the board. The people became angered, and blows were rife; at first they threw the loaves, the while they lasted, and the silver bowls, filled with wine, and afterwards with the fists approached to necks ... There was fight exceeding great; each man smote other; there was much blood shed, mischief was among the folk![15]

The Round Table in fact embodied that heroic tradition of personal loyalty due from vassal to lord which feudalism inherited from the tribal past and which helped to form part of the cement of feudal society. It also embodied one of the contradictions of that society – the perennial problem of the king was to find some means of rewarding his fighters and retaining their loyalty without transforming them into feudal lords whose estates gave them a quasi-independence and an interest other than his own. Hence one of the great themes of medieval literature is the perpetual conflict between the interest of the feudal ruling class *as a whole* and the interest of the feudal lord as an individual, resulting in a complex interplay of loyalty and treason, honour and faith-breaking, which has no conclusion and, in the end, was one of the reasons for the decay of feudal society. The Round Table was an attempt on an ideal plane, as the orders of chivalry were on an actual plane, to resolve this contradiction, but it remained ideal, because the material basis on which Arthur's company rested is always left undefined. By the time of Malory this real conflict had become endemic and devastating, and it is Malory's treatment of this theme which gives *Le Morte Darthur* much of its vitality and its tragic force.

Malory lies at the end of three centuries of evolution in which the English and French Arthurian traditions had had time to interpenetrate and fuse. At its lower levels the English tradition suffered from the dull banality of the pseudo-chronicle, became a mere catalogue of names and battles, but at its best it had a compression and a dramatic force which the French versions quite lacked. When enriched by elements from France and from the Welsh and Breton wonder-tales, it could reach the heights of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Written in a mixture of alliterative and rhyming verse this really great poem bridges the gap in more ways than one, lying as it does almost midway between Layamon and Malory. Malory, in whom the fusion culminated, used mainly French sources,[16] but he used them in the English way. And it is significant that his last section, *The Morte Arthur Saunz Guerdon* (Books XX and XXI in Caxton's printing), where he is using French and English sources simultaneously,[17] is generally recognised as the supreme masterpiece of Arthurian literature.

III Gawain and Lancelot

Nothing perhaps throws more light on the development of the Arthurian theme than the story of Gawain. As Walwain or Gwalchmai he is one of the earliest characters in the Cycle. He is Welsh in origin, with features that were remote and primitive and hard for the Anglo-Normans to accept. Many of these features he retained throughout, even in Malory's late fifteenth-century version: his strength grows from dawn to noon and wanes as the sun sinks, his maternal relations are far more important than his paternal, and all have magical attributes, in general his adventures have a peculiar element of fantasy and even of the grotesque. He was originally one of Arthur's principal followers, and he was too prominent to be removed entirely. Instead,we find a progressive detraction, as new figures are introduced who usurp many of his attributes and adventures.[18]

One of the earliest and most important of these is his visit to the Otherworld. Such visits have a strongly mythological character and are of two kinds. One is by invitation of the Otherworld Queen, whom the hero often marries, as in the case of Bran or of Thomas the Rhymer. The other is in despite of the King, whose treasure is removed or captives released. Both types of visit are found in a confused form in versions of the Gawain story, but it is the second which is of special interest.

Such visits link on the one hand with the early Welsh references to Arthur in the extremely archaic poem *Preidu Annwfyn*, which tells of a series of tragic raids upon the Otherworld in search of magical and life-giving treasures,

> Three freights of Prydwen went we into it,
> But seven came back from Caer Sidi,

and on the other with the popular medieval theme of the Harrowing of Hell. The widespread belief that Christ ravaged Hell between his crucifixion and resurrection, rescuing from torment the souls of the dead,[19] has no place in the canonical books of the Bible, but is based upon a long account in the apocryphal *Gospel of Nicodemus*. It took an extraordinary hold upon the imagination of the people. It is to be found, developed in great detail, in Anglo-Saxon poetry, in the Miracle Plays, for example at Chester and Wakefield, and, most magnificently, in Langland's *Piers*

Plowman,[20] as well as in many more scattered and casual references. It is a theme in which Christ appears as the champion of the oppressed, destroying death and liberating the captives, as well as personifying the victory of reason and order over chaos. Christ comes bearing the arms of Piers, the hero of the people, beating down the doors of Hell, which is depicted as a typical feudal castle garrisoned by the lords of the strong hand:

> One resembling the Samaritan · and somewhat to Piers the Plowman,
> Barefoot on an ass back · bootless came riding,
> Without spurs or spear · sparkling he looked,
> As is the way of a knight · that cometh to be dubbed,
> To get him gilt spurs · and slashed shoes.
> Then was Faith at a window · and cried Ah! son of David!
> As doth a herald of arms · when adventurers come to joust ...
> 'Who shall joust with Jesus?' quoth I · Jews or scribes?
> 'Nay', quoth he, 'the foul fiend · and Falsehood and Death.
> Death saith he shall undo · and bring down
> All that liveth or looketh · in land or water.
> Life saith that he lies · and layeth his life to wager,
> That for all Death can do · within three days,
> To walk and fetch from the fiend · Piers fruit the Plowman,
> And lay it where he liketh · and Lucifer bind,
> And beat down and bring down · bale and death for ever.'

The Harrowing of Hell theme,[21] so potentially revolutionary, is found, I think, only in the literature that voiced the feelings of the lower orders, and it would perhaps have been surprising to find it attaching itself to the courtly Arthurian Cycle. Yet this nearly happened, because of the already existing connection of Arthur and Gawain with the Otherworld. I do not know that anyone has commented upon the close parallels between the recognised Harrowing of Hell literature and parts of Chrétien de Troyes' *Lancelot*, yet these are far too striking to be accidental. Lancelot sets out to rescue Arthur's queen, and all the captives held by Meleagant (Malory's Mellyagaunt) in his Otherworld kingdom. In the episode of his ride in the felon's cart he re-enacts Christ's journey to Calvary. He rolls away the stone from the sepulchre:

> ... You may be sure that to raise it would require seven men stronger than you or I. There is an inscription on it which says that anyone who can lift this stone of his own unaided strength will set free all the men and women who are captives in the land, whence no slave or noble can issue forth, unless he is a native of that land. No one has ever come

> back from there, but they are detained in foreign prisons; whereas they of the country go and come in and out as they please. At once the knight goes to grasp the stone and raises it more easily than ten men would do who exerted all their strength.[22]

And in language almost identical with that in which both *The Gospel of Nicodemus* and Langland describe the dismay of the devils on hearing of Christ's approach, Meleagant's squire calls to him:

> Sire, sire, make haste! For the people of Logres have attacked in force the inhabitants of this land, and war and strife have already broken out; and they say that this country has been invaded by a knight who has been in many battles, and that wherever he wishes to go, no one, however reluctantly, is able to deny him passage. And further they say that he will deliver those who are in this country, and will subdue our people.

Afterwards Lancelot is praised by those he has freed much as Christ was by the souls in Hell:

> Gentlemen, this is he who is to deliver us all from durance and misery, in which we have so long been confined, and we ought to do him great honour when, to set us free, he has passed through so many perils and is ready to face many more.[23]

It is noteworthy that by this time Lancelot has replaced Gawain as the principal hero. Gawain is still too prominent to be left out, but has been given only a secondary role. By the time of Malory he has vanished from the episode, and along with him all the 'Otherworld' features. Mellyagaunt has become a common kidnapper and Lancelot's rescue of Guinevere is effected by quite mundane prowess: the cart which played such a symbolic part in Chrétien's poem has now become a merely tactical device to enable Lancelot to reach Mellyagaunt's castle after the wounding of his horse.[24] This, of course, is also in keeping with Malory's tendency to rationalise the story wherever possible.

The Harrowing of Hell vanishes from the Cycle to be replaced by the Grail theme to which it is undoubtedly related, for the Grail in one aspect is a christianisation of the magic cauldron of Anwen to capture which the traditional Welsh Arthur invades the Otherworld. Perhaps this is another example of the tendency already noted to make the Arthurian tradition safe from the point

of view of the ruling class and the Church. The Grail theme, although a late addition to the Cycle, quickly came to occupy a central position in the hands of the Cistercian redactors of the thirteenth century.[25] Soon it developed into a standard by which the worldly splendour and virtues of Arthur's court are judged and condemned. In the French romances the Grail Quest becomes the heart of the story and its failure leads directly to the final catastrophe.[26]

In this process Gawain suffers further degradation. Originally the hero of the Grail Quest, he is gradually deposed in favour of Lancelot, of Percival (who was once, perhaps, Gawain's son, as J.L. Weston suggests, just as Lancelot in turn was deposed by *his* son, Galahad) and finally by Galahad. Professor Vinaver writes:

> The case of Gawain is particularly interesting. He is one of the most famous knights of the Round Table, second only to Lancelot. Most devoted to his king, he is generous and noble, courageous and strong. He possesses all of man's earthly virtues and is very much loved and honoured by both 'countrymen and strangers' ... But since God has no part in his career, his brilliant qualities do not help him, and he ends as a vile criminal. It was dangerous, perhaps, to make a sinner so attractive, and it was essential to show that his virtues and successes could lead to no result.[27]

Nor are even his earthly virtues left intact. *Gawain and the Green Knight* is peculiar in representing him as the perfect example of knighthood so late as the end of the thirteenth century, and this is another example of the influence of the English tradition, which was much slower than the French to adopt new viewpoints. Generally by this time he has been surpassed in prowess by a number of later comers, so that Malory is much more in line with the general view when he makes Sir Tristram, in a conversation about current rankings, place him well down the list:

> 'Sir,' he said, 'here lodged the last night sir Ector de Marys and a damsel with him. And the damsel told me that he was one of the best knights of the world.'
>
> 'That is not so,' said sir Tristram, 'for I know four better knights of his own blood. And the first is sir Lancelot du Lake, call him the best knight, and sir Bors de Ganys, sir Bleoberys de Ganys, and sir Blamour de Ganys, and also sir Gaherys.'
>
> 'Nay,' said his host, 'sir Gawain is the better knight.'
>
> 'That is not so,' said sir Tristram, 'for I have met with them both,

> and I have felt sir Gaherys for the better knight. And sir Lamorak, I call him as good as any of them, except sir Lancelot.'
>
> 'Sir, why name ye not sir Tristram?' said his host. 'For I account him as good a knight as any of them.'
>
> 'I know not sir Tristram,' said sir Tristram.[28]

Elsewhere Percival, Pelleas and Marhaus are all placed above Gawain.

Nor is this all. Because Gawain was a primitive figure, with the character of the pre-feudal age still strong upon him, he came to seem by Church and feudal standards morally unacceptable. Originally he seems to have been the Queen's lover as well as her rescuer from the Otherworld.[29] Guinevere's character as the adulterous wife was certainly taken from the Welsh tradition, and the uncle-wife-nephew triangle was usual enough – as in the case of Tristram, Mordred and the Irish Diarmide. This story seems to have been dropped when it appeared contradictory to the idea of suitability for the chivalrous hero which Gawain became, before the later idealisation of courtly adulterous love gained currency. Then, however, the theme of Guinevere's adultery was revived in a modern, romantic way, but with Lancelot and not Gawain as the lover. Lancelot, indeed, seems to have taken on many of Gawain's original attributes.

Gawain, meanwhile, was no longer regarded as an especially edifying character, and was allowed to resume his old amoral nature. This created all sorts of contradictions which emerge clearly enough in Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*. On the one hand, he was too well established to be ignored: as Arthur's nephew and the head of a powerful clan he must be given a prominent place in the story – yet that place is equivocal. The killing of Lamorak and his gross breach of faith in seducing Ettarde after he had promised to win her for Pelleas[30] could not possibly be squared with the code of chivalrous behaviour: he is depicted as rash, passionate and bloody-minded, so that even his own brother condemns him:

> For ever after sir Gareth had observed sir Gawain's disposition, he withdrew himself from his brother sir Gawain's fellowship, for he was ever revengeful, and where he hated it would be avenged with murder, and that hated sir Gareth.[31]

On the other hand, in Book V, describing the war of Arthur upon the Emperor Lucius, he plays a heroic role, and in the final books, though his hatred of Lancelot and his determination to

avenge the death of his kindred has tragic consequences, he rises to an epic grandeur and nobility towards which even his faults seem to contribute. It is perhaps significant that in both these sections Malory was following English as well as French sources. Part of these contradictions arise for Malory's method of work. Professor Vinaver has shown, as a result of his brilliant editorial work on the Winchester Manuscript, that Caxton's text created a false impression of unity. What seemed to be intended as a single work was in fact written by Malory as eight separate books, based on different sources.[32] Each book is self-consistent in its interpretation of event and character, but little attempt is made to reconcile one with another. Malory was content to follow his sources, merely cutting what he felt superfluous and adding and adapting to suit his general idea of the nature of the story.

Nevertheless a total impression emerges. The more carefully one reads *La Morte Darthur* the more one is struck by the part played by the often concealed but never really absent conflict between the two great rival groups in Arthur's court – the kindred and faction of Gawain and the kindred and faction of Lancelot. This was something which Malory, who had lived through and participated in the Wars of the Roses, the outcome of just such a feud, was particularly fitted to appreciate. Of all the versions of the Arthurian story his is the most sustainedly political, almost, one might say, the only political version. This is one of the reasons why his book has a reality and almost a topical quality which neither the pseudo-chroniclers like Geoffrey of Monmouth nor the pure romance writers ever attained.

This conflict is not merely one between individuals or interest factions: it is a conflict between two sets of ideas, two civilisations, two worlds. In it Gawain represents the old. He is Arthur's kinsman, all his deepest feelings are family feelings, his loyalty is the ancient loyalty of the blood bond. Friendship is an extension of the older kindred loyalty, and must give way to it when the two conflict. Love is an incident, and it is not by chance that he had always the character of a faithless lover.

Lancelot stands for the new, though in him, perhaps by reason of the archaic material from which the Arthurian Cycle was created, old and new also contend. His loyalty is the new loyalty of vassal for a lord, which, as we have seen, is feudal in form though still often pre-feudal in content and heroic in expression. But this

loyalty, in which old and new contend, is confronted with another obligation. His choice between loyalty and love, two absolute duties as the thought of the time conceived them, is thus also a choice between old and new. The claim of love is wholly individual, and represents a set of values wholly new. Lancelot, after a deep inner conflict, chooses the new, emphasising the sharpness of the difference between himself and Gawain, the man irrevocably rooted in the tribal past.

The climax is reached – and this is one of Malory's own contributions to the story – when in rescuing Guinevere from burning Lancelot is forced unwittingly to kill Gareth, who, as Gawain says,

> loved him better than me and all his brethren and the king both. Also I dare say, if sir Lancelot had desired my brother sir Gareth with him, he would have been with him against the king and us all. And therefore I may never believe that sir Lancelot slew my brethren.[33]

Gareth had been knighted by Lancelot, and was in a real sense an adopted blood-brother: his death set in motion a feud in which no compromise was possible:

> 'My king, my lord and mine uncle,' said sir Gawain, 'wit you well, now I shall make you a promise which I shall hold by my knighthood, that from this day foreward I shall never fail sir Lancelot until one of us have slain the other. And therefore I require you, my lord and king, dress you unto the war, for wit you well, I will be revenged upon sir Lancelot; and therefore, as ye will have my service and my love, now haste you thereto and assay your friends. For I promise unto God,' said sir Gawain, 'for the death of my brother, sir Gareth, I shall seek sir Lancelot throughout seven kings' realms, but I shall slay him or else he shall slay me.'[34]

In this struggle the Round Table, an uneasy balance between two worlds, was finally destroyed. Here, as so often elsewhere, Malory is following the English tradition. For the French writers the heart of the Matter was the Grail Quest: for Malory, the Round Table, Kingship and the human tragedy of divided loyalty.

IV Malory and Feudal Decadence

The Arthurian Cycle, like the idea of chivalry, took shape in the period of the consolidation of feudal society, at a time when a decent cover had to be found for a code of behaviour still

essentially barbarous. Chivalry was both such a covering and an organising force for social and military ends. 'The use of an organised knighthood,' wrote Vincent de Beauvais, 'lies in protecting the Church, attacking disloyalty, reverencing the priesthood, avenging the wrongs of the poor, keeping the country in a state of quiet.' Vincent, as a cleric, has his own emphasis – one may hazard the guess that the second and last of the uses listed were of the greatest practical importance.

The knightly orders that were founded during the time when the idea of the Round Table was spreading, had a real military and social significance. But by the beginning of the fourteenth century the situation was changed. The orders were growing rich and corrupt: in 1312 the Templars were suppressed amid a scandal of European dimensions, the full facts about which have never yet been fully determined. Underlying these changes were changes in military strategy and organisation which began to undermine the predominance of the knightly class.

Professional armies began to replace the horde of knights and their personal followings, upon whom no sort of order or discipline could be imposed. In these armies the knight still had his place, but he was no longer more effective than the heavily armed professional man-at-arms who rode and fought beside him. With the increasing importance of the archer and the consequent tendency of the armoured knight to dismount and fight on foot, his importance was further diminished. The victories of the Flemish artisans over French chivalry were even more damaging than the English victories at Crecy and Poitiers, where the superiority of the new tactics and weapons was convincingly demonstrated. The development of artillery in the fifteenth century ended the security of the feudal nobility by rendering their castles obsolete.

As the practical importance of chivalry declined, its ornamental side increased in a riot of over-compensation. During the fourteenth century new orders were founded: the Garter in 1349, the Annuncation in 1392, the Golden Fleece in 1429. These, unlike the earlier orders, were decorative from the start. The real object of the Order of the Garter, as Professor Vinaver says,

> was to exhibit the brilliancy of Court festivals ... At the procession 'the Habits were so ordered that the more grave and civil being placed between those that are rich and gallant, entertained the beholders with a more delightful prospect'. This was perhaps the most typical

> expression of the chivalric temper of the late Middle Ages. The ideal of a knight combining bravery, generosity, and devotion was no longer a reality, and picturesque parades had taken the place of arms and prayers.[35]

The empty forms were preserved and developed in a way that seems almost farcical. J. Huizinga gives a striking example in

> the duel between princes, always being announced, but never carried out ... In reading the summary of the carefully arranged preparations for these princely duels, we ask ourselves, if they were not a conscious feint, either to impose upon one's enemy, or to appease the grievances of one's own subjects. Are we not to regard them as an inextricable mixture of humbug and of a chimerical, but, after all, sincere, craving to conform to the life heroic, by posing before all the world as the champion of right, who does not hesitate to sacrifice himself for his people?[36]

At the same time, knighthood was growing more exclusive, and a division was appearing in the former knightly class, which, losing its military functions, had to look for new activities and discover more reasons for existence.

> The precious and elaborate character of much medieval chivalry is accounted for by the fact that before the end of the thirteenth century the knightly ranks were closing. Royalty was claiming the sole right to confer knighthood; the ceremony itself was becoming a matter of great expense; and more and more descendants of noble families were drawing together to keep themselves above the large masses of military tenants who had increased with the growing subdivision of fees.[37]

Thus, and this applies particularly to England, while the nobility and richer gentry were becoming mere courtiers, the lesser gentry were staying at home. Where they had once lived largely by consuming the produce of their estates and looking to war as a source of extra income from ransoms and plunder, they now began to produce wool and food for the market, often with hired labour instead of the forced services of the earlier Middle Ages. These changes were intensified by the prolonged economic crisis that set in during the fourteenth century. The gentry began to serve as Justices of the Peace and to interest themselves in the details of local government at a time when almost all government was local. If they left their counties for London, it was most probably to sit in Parliament or to institute some legal suit. They developed a

passion for litigation, which did not prevent them from indulging in armed affrays and raids upon their neighbours when a convenient opportunity offered itself. For these purposes they commonly placed themselves under the protection of one of the great nobles, as Malory himself did with the Earl of Warwick.

It was in this age of the degeneration of feudalism that the Arthurian Cycle had its further development. The Grail Quest became the dominating feature, and the earthly glory and power of chivalry was more and more depreciated: in an age when it was losing its practical, mundane importance, it was not unnatural to feel that the approval of heaven was also withdrawn. As chivalry and knighthood were emptied of meaning, so the Arthurian Cycle, and romance literature generally, lost contact with reality, growing more spiritualised, with the predominance of the Grail theme, more precious, reflecting the artificiality of manners, and more fantastic and grotesque as adventures were elaborated without end and merely for the sake of elaboration. So an end was reached with the situation revealed by the only slightly exaggerated criticism of the romances by Cervantes's curate. Much earlier Chaucer had implied somewhat the same criticism in the *Tale of Sir Thopas*, and less directly by his complete disregard of Arthurian matter.

This dreary elaboration shows itself perhaps most clearly in the Book of Sir Tristram. Here we have the bones of a tale of heroic simplicity, which has made a constant appeal to poets,[38] and which was certainly originally a Celtic tale unrelated to the Arthurian Cycle. Once incorporated, it was blown up to gigantic proportions by the addition of every kind of irrelevant adventure, though it must be admitted that the Tristram section came to include some fine things like the story of Lancelot and Elaine. Malory having devoted more than a third of his total space to it without reaching an end, finally rebelled and broke it off without even such pretence of an excuse as he makes for cutting short the Lancelot section:

> And because I have lost the very matter of Shevalere de Charyot I depart from the tale of sir Lancelot; and here I go unto the death of Arthur, and that caused sir Aggravayne.[39]

He says merely:

> Here endeth the second book of sir Tristram de Lyoness, Which was drawn out of the French by sir Thomas Malory, knight, as Jesu be his

help. Amen.
But here is no rehearsal of the third book.[40]

Malory's revolt against the direction which the romance had taken was, I think, deliberate and conscious and tells us a good deal about his purpose and methods. It is shown not only in the kind of cutting already mentioned, but by his ruthless treatment of the Grail theme, from which he omits as far as possible all the theological and mystical matter and whose importance for the whole Cycle he undermines. It is shown no less by the heroic and epic note which he reintroduces, and the strong national feeling which pervades his work. What he seems to be trying to do throughout is to restore to the Cycle a sense of reality, to give it once more a contemporary significance.

For Malory was very much a man of his age, who nevertheless still believed in the value of knighthood and the idea of chivalry. Yet, being of his age, he felt that they needed refashioning, and this he set out to do in his recreation of the Cycle. We can see easily enough now that he was attempting a hopeless task, that knighthood, whatever it might once have meant, was something that had passed beyond the possibility of recovery, and that he could only think otherwise by shutting his eyes to whole aspects of reality. One example may be taken from the field of military technique, in which Malory obviously regarded himself as an expert. In his time this had already been revolutionised by the archer, and a second revolution was taking place in his lifetime by the introduction of artillery. Yet for all his practical sense he shows no realisation of these facts. Archers are mentioned only once, where Mellyagaunt 'laid in an embushment of the best arches that he might get in his country, to the number of thirty to await upon sir Lancelot'.[41] Artillery is also only mentioned once, in what must have been a conscious anachronism, when, Guinevere having taken refuge in the Tower, Mordred 'laid a mighty siege about the Tower, and made many assaults, and threw engines unto them, and shot great guns'.[42] Thus, the two innovations which in his own time had transformed the science of war, appear only as mean tricks employed by contemptible people, without a hint anywhere that they were already making the armour-clad knight obsolete. Yet Malory, who was a practical soldier, cannot have been unaware of this, and such contradictions are typical of his work.

So we have an epic story, shot through with the new practicality of the fifteenth century. Such contradictions are in keeping with what we know about his life.[43] His apparently criminal record, with his many imprisonments for riot, assaults and the like, has puzzled and disturbed some modern writers. On the face of it, it is inconsistent with his own professions:

> 'What?' said sir Lancelot, 'is he a thief and a knight? and a ravisher of women? He doth shame unto the Order of knighthood, and contrary unto his oath. It is pity that he liveth!'[44]

Perhaps these nice critics have distressed themselves unnecessarily. The fifteenth century in England was an age of private violence and of feuds among neighbouring gentry, and Malory undoubtedly shared this characteristic of his age, But on examination his exploits are capable of more than one explanation. His principal opponents seem to have been certain monastic establishments that had long been at odds with the surrounding countryside: Malory's activities have more the appearance of those of a leader of a popular movement than of an ordinary criminal. Perhaps we might say that he saw himself rather as a knight-errant redressing a public wrong than as a bandit. His biographer, Edward Hicks, suggests that he may, like many of the minor gentry of the Midlands, have had Lollard leanings.[45] There is nothing in *Le Morte Darthur* which suggests this directly, but it is certainly not out of keeping with his deliberate writing-down of the sacramental element in the Grail Quest. It has been suggested, no less plausibly, by G.L. Kitteridge that the charges of rape that were brought against him were no more than a legal fiction.[46]

For the rest, it is on record that Malory served in the wars against France and Scotland,[47] and took part in the Wars of the Roses. As a follower of the Earls of Warwick he was presumably first a Yorkist and then a Lancastrian, and it was as a Lancastrian that he suffered his last imprisonment, which perhaps only ended with his death in 1471.

The discovery in 1934 of the Winchester Manuscript established the certainty of the conjecture, based on the final paragraph of Caxton's text, that his book was written in prison. While a prisoner he reflected upon his life and age, on the tragic outcome of the violence, disloyalty and civil disorder of which he had seen so much, and *Le Morte Darthur* is the fruit of this meditation. It was

this above all which gave it the character of a serious political work. Again and again, from his rebuke to the English for being 'so new-fangill'[48] to the grim and vivid description of Arthur's last battlefield:

> Then heard they people cry in the field.
>
> 'Now go thou, sir Lucan,' said the king, 'and do me to wit what betokens that noise in the field.'
>
> So sir Lucan departed, for he was grievously wounded in many places; and as he went he saw and hearkened by the moonlight how that pillagers and robbers were come into the field to pillage and to rob many a full noble knight of brooches and bracelets and of many a good ring and many a rich jewel. And who that were not dead outright, there they slew them for their harness and their riches.[49]

we are faced with this sense of a man writing not of the distant past but of what he knew.

It is this relation of the ancient Matter to his own experience which gives his work a quality that makes *Le Morte Darthur* a living book today, once we have learnt to look below the romantic trappings. Malory was looking to the ideas of chivalry and knighthood as the cement for a falling world, as they had once been the cement for a developing one. He thought of them as something that might preserve his class and all that it valued from the ruin which faced them. It was a vain search but not an ignoble one: in an age of treason, violence and greed he proclaimed a simple faith in the virtues of courage, faith and loyalty as the basis of social stability. But he was too much a realist, and too much a man of his age not to be influenced by the new, common-sense money releations that were increasingly dominating the fifteenth-century scene. Thus, the final evidence which Ector offers Lancelot of Guinevere's love is that: 'it hath cost my lady the queen twenty thousand pounds the seeking of you'.[50] And neither Lancelot, the model of knightly behaviour, nor Malory himself, find it anything but proper that in rejecting Elayne's love he can say:

> But because, fair damnsel, that ye love me as ye do, I will for your good will and kindness show you some goodness. That is this, that wheresomever ye will set your heart upon some good knight that will wed you, I shall give you together a thousand pounds yearly, to you and to your heirs.[51]

Malory knows that marriage is a serious matter of fiefs and dowries, and at his most romantic realises that this must be so for the class to which he belongs in the conditions under which it existed. And if love and marriage were by no means the same thing, love itself was for him a matter of good sense and stability, far removed from the artificial tangle of the adulterous courtly love in which the romances were founded. His Lancelot and Chrétien's have little in common but a name and some superifical incidents. Chrétien's hero is a dummy to whom are affixed the sentiments and conventional attitudes of the courtly lover: he speaks and acts by the book – and what a book! Malory's Lancelot is a real person caught in a desperate tangle of conflicting loyalties and emotions from which he cannot escape without destroying both himself and the two people – Guinevere and Arthur – whom he most loves. He is, perhaps, the first true character, observed from the inside, in the whole of modern European literature.[52]

His faith and devotion to his mistress are as unfailing as in any of the older romances, yet his attitude is at bottom as practical as Malory's own. When he is reproached by a lady, 'that ye will not love some maiden or gentlewoman,' he replies:

> Fair damsel, I may not warn people to speak of me what it pleaseth them. But for to be a wedded man, I think it not, for then I must couch with her and leave arms and tournaments, battles and adventures. And as for to say to take my pleasaunce with paramours, that will I refuse: in principal for dread of God, for knights that be adventurers should not be adulterers, nor lecherous, for then they be not happy nor fortunate unto the wars; for either they shall be overcome with a simpler knight than they be themselves, or else they shall slay by mischance and their cursedness better men than they be themselves. And so who that useth paramours shall be unhappy and all thing unhappy that is about them.[53]

And at the last Lancelot and Guinevere repent, not on moral or theological grounds of the sinfulness of their adulterous love, but because of its fatal practical and political consequences:

> Through this same man and me hath all this war been wrought, and the death of the most noblest knights of the world; for through our love that we have loved together is my most noble lord slain. Therefore, sir Lancelot, wit thou well that I am set in such a plight to get my soul-heal. And yet I trust, through God's grace and through His Passion of his wide wounds, that after my death I may have sight of the

> blessed face of Christ Jesu, and on Doomsday to sit on His right side; for as sinful as ever I was, now are saints in heaven.[54]

Malory himself, in a famous passage that owes little to any of his sources, strikes the same note:

> For, like as winter doth always erase and deface green summer, so fareth it by unstable love in man and woman, for in many persons there is no stability: for we may see all day, for a little blast of winter's mark, anon we shall deface and lay apart true love, for little or nought, that cost much thing. This is no wisdom, nor no stability, but it is feebleness of nature and great disworship, whoever useth this.
>
> Therefore, like as May month flowereth and flourisheth in every man's garden, so in like wise let every man of worship flourish his heart in this world: first unto God, and next unto the joy of them that he promised his faith unto; for there was never worshipful man nor worshipful woman but they loved one better than another; and worship in arms may never be foiled. But first reserve the honour to God, and secondly thy quarrel must come of thy lady. And such love I call worshipful love.[55]

Love, in short, is justified in so far as it helps the knight to be more efficient. Tristram and Palomides fight well above their usual form at a tournament where Isoud is among the spectators. It is to be deplored when it disrupts the social structure. Arthur ignores the love of Lancelot and Guinevere as long as he can, and when it is forced upon his notice, his distress is practical rather than romantic:

> Wit you well, my heart was never so heavy as it is now. And much more am I sorrier for my good knights' loss than for the loss of my fair queen; for queens I might have enow, but such a fellowship of good knights shall never be together in no company. And now I dare say there was never a Christian king that ever held such a fellowship together. And alas, that ever sir Lancelot and I should be at debate! Ah, Aggravayne, Aggravayne! Jesu forgive it thy soul, for thine evil will that thou hadst and sir Mordred, thy brother, unto sir Lancelot hath caused all this sorrow.[56]

Defeated, a prisoner, sick perhaps, Malory endowed his epic with the sense of failure and decay which he felt for his own life and his own cause. His heart broke with Lancelot's, knighthood as he understood it was passing with Arthur. And here, I think, lies the key to the unintended greatness of his achievement. He set out to glorify knighthood, to breathe new life into it, so that 'Chivalry

becomes a useful discipline which, if properly practised, can make its adherents into "the sternest knights to their foes".'[57] If he had succeeded there would have been but one more obsolete treatise on medieval manners. But he failed because in his heart he knew that the world he valued and wished to revive was passing beyond recall. Feudal society was still to be a long time dying, even in England where the process of decay was most evident. But already the signs of doom were upon it, and gravely, magnificently and unwittingly Malory pronounced its funeral oration.

Notes

1. Caxton, *Le Morte Darthur*, Preface.
2. The study of Malory was placed on a new footing by the discovery at Winchester in 1934 of a hitherto unknown manuscript of his work. It has been edited by Professor Eugène Vinaver, and his text supersedes all previous ones. A three volume critical edition was published in 1947 by the Clarendon Press, and a single volume edition in 1954. All my quotations from Malory will be from this latter edition, which will be cited merely as *Works*, as this is more likely to be accessible to the average reader. For the convenience of those with other editions I shall also give Book and Chapter references from Caxton's printed edition. I have modernised the language of these quotations throughout. When referring to Vinaver's three volume edition I shall distinguish it as *Works*, 1947. I refer in my text to Malory's work under the old title *Le Morte Darthur*, but it should be remembered that this is Caxton's title, not Malory's. When making other quotations I have referred whenever possible to editions easily accessible, such as those in the Everyman series.
3. Caxton, op. cit.
4. William of Malmesbury's *Chronicle of the Kings of England from the Earliest Period to the Reign of King Stephen* (trans. J. Sharpe), London 1847, p. 11.
5. Ibid., p. 315.
6. *Histories of the Kings of Britain* (trans. Sebastian Evans, rev. Charles Dunn), London 1963 (Everyman's Library), p. 1. Geoffrey's book, if it existed, may have been in Breton rather than Welsh.
7. 'Once in seven years Earl Gerald rides round the Curragh of Kildare. His horse like Arthur's at Cadbury has silver shoes. They were half an inch thick when he fell asleep. When they are worn as thin as a cat's ear a miller's son with six fingers on each hand will blow a trumpet and Gerald will do battle with the English.' E.K. Chambers, *Arthur of Britain*, London 1927, p. 225.
8. Ibid., p. 109.
9. Ibid., p. 125.
10. *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English Nations*, London 1954 (Everyman's Library), p. 206.

11. Edgar Prestage (ed.), *Chivalry. A Series of Studies to Illustrate its Historical Significance and Civilising Influence*, London 1928, p. 18.
12. Ibid., p. 20.
13. e.g. by Alfred Nutt, *Celtic and Medieval Romance*, London 1899, pp. 16–17.
14. W.P. Ker, *Epic and Romance – Essays on Medieval literature*, London 1897, pp. 371–2.
15. Layamon's *Brut* (trans. Eugene Mason), London 1912 (Everyman's Library), p. 120.
16. Eugène Vinaver, *Malory*, Oxford 1929, passim.
17. Eugène Vinaver, *The Tale of the Death of King Arthur*, Oxford 1955, p. xii.
18. For a general discussion of the part played by Gawain and Lancelot in the Cycle see Jessie L. Weston, *The Legend of Sir Gawain*, London 1897 and *The Three Days' Tournament*, London 1902.
19. In some versions the righteous dead, in others all souls in hell. See W. Hone, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, London 1821, pp. 44–71 and *Ancient Mysteries Described*, London 1823, pp. 120–37.
20. *Passus* XVIII, B Text.
21. The continued attraction of this theme can be seen in modern treatments by A.E. Housman ('Hell Gate' in *Last Poems*, London 1922) and E.M. Forster ('The Point of It' in *The Eternal Moment*, London 1928, but written about 1912).
22. Chrétien de Troyes, *Eric and Enid*, (trans. and intro. W.W. Comfort) London (Everyman's Library), p. 294.
23. Ibid., pp. 299, 300. W.P. Ker cites an even more striking passage from an unnamed romance: 'Gawain turned and looked back; and behold, across the river, all the streets of the place were filled with men and women, rejoicing and singing in carol-wise: *The people that sat in darkness have beheld a great light.' The Dark Ages*, New York 1958, p. 50.
24. *Works*, p. 707 (XIX.4).
25. Just at the time when Robert de Boron and others were elaborating the Grail theme, the question of the Eucharist was being hotly debated in theological circles. The definition of eucharistic doctrine was laid down by the Lateran Council (1215). The romance writers were thus making the most of a topic that was then highly fashionable. Charles Williams, *Arthurian Torso*, London 1948, pp. 16, 61. For a general account of the Grail theme see Jessie L. Weston, *From Ritual to Romance*, Cambridge 1920.
26. Vinaver, *Malory*, pp. 70–3.
27. Ibid., p. 73.
28. *Works*, p. 415 (IX.43).
29. Weston, *The Legend of Sir Gawain*, pp. 73–8.
30. *Works*, p. 124 (IV.23)
31. *Works*, p. 270 (VII.34).
32. *Works*, 1947, Col. I, pp. xxx-xli.
33. *Works*, p. 834 (XX.9).
34. *Works*, p. 835 (XX.10).

35. Vinaver, *Malory*, pp. 57–8.
36. J. Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, London 1924, pp. 96–7.
37. Prestage (ed.), op. cit., p. 52.
38. For example, Arnold, Swinburne and Hardy.
39. *Works*, p. 816 (XIX.14). It is hard to accept this excuse. Malory probably had access to the fine library of Greyfriars in London and could easily have found the manuscript if he had wished. See Edward Hicks, *Sir Thomas Malory. His Turbulent Career*, London 1928, pp. 65–6.
40. *Works*, p. 623 (XII.14).
41. *Works*, p. 795 (XIX.3).
42. *Works*, p. 860 (XXI.1).
43. The identification of the writer with Sir Thomas Malory of Newbold Revel in Warwickshire is not absolutely established, but may be regarded as certain enough for practical purposes.
44. *Works*, p. 193 (VI.10). A passage peculiar to Malory, with no parallel in his sources.
45. Hicks, op. cit., pp. 40–7.
46. G.L. Kitteridge, *Sir Thomas Malory*, London 1925, quoted in Hicks, op. cit., pp. 52–3. Malory was charged with 'feloniously raping Joan, the wife of Hugh Smyth'. Kitteridge comments: 'Malory and his servants had searched Smyth's house in vain. Smyth's wife, who objected to the search, may have been roughly treated; perhaps she was forcibly removed from the dwelling while it was ransacked. That would have been *raptus*. then, on the first of August, the search was repeated with similar violence and with complete success ... On neither occasion is there any likelihood that Goodwife Smyth was actually ravished. The duplication of this particular charge is reason enough for rejecting such an idea: it is ridiculous to suppose that Malory actually ravished the woman twice.'
47. Vinaver suggests (*Works*, 1947, Col. I, p. xxv) that Malory may have drawn Arthur with Henry V in his mind. This is at least more convincing than Tennyson's comparison with the Prince Consort!
48. *Works*, p. 862 (XXI.1).
49. *Works*, p. 869 (XXI.4).
50. *Works*, p. 616 (XII.9).
51. *Works*, p. 777 (XVIII.19).
52. T.H. White, in his modern Arthurian Cycle, *The Once and Future King*, London 1958, brilliantly develops the Lancelot–Guinevere situation and Lancelot's character. Yet for the most part he only expands and brings fully to light what is already implicit in Malory's treatment. I regard his book as the one genuine and creative modern contribution to the Matter of Britain, with the possible exception of some of Morris' shorter poems.
53. *Works*, pp. 194–5 (VI.10).
54. *Works*, p. 876 (XXi.9).
55. *Works*, pp. 790–91 (XVIII.25).
56. *Works*, p. 833 (XX.9).
57. *Works*, 1947, Vol. I, p. xxvi.

Shakespeare's Historical Outlook

I The Dilemma of Humanism

Shakespeare lived at a time when the feudal customary and corporate society was distintegrating before the growth of bourgeois relations. Just because the feudal norms were for the first time threatened and questioned, men became more fully aware of them. What was Shakespeare's attitude? Did he welcome the new values? Did he regret the passing of the old? *Timon*, at least, suggests that he did, or, perhaps, that he was bewildered by problems to which no answer could be found. If, like Cervantes, he was a man astride between two worlds, the point is that for the first time there were two worlds pulling men in different ways. Shakespeare brought the sensibility of a great poet to bear on the problems of his age, but a poet is not necessarily a sociologist or a historian, and we have no right to ask him the same kind of questions, or to expect the same kind of answers, as we would of them. As Professor L.C. Knights says:

> Shakespeare, of course, was not a political writer in the sense in which Milton and Dryden were sometimes political writers ... But he was deeply interested in the nature of kingship and authority, and in men's relations with each other in the sphere of public life; and if there is no Shakespearean political doctrine there is a recognisably Shakespearean manner in the dramatic presentation of political situations and problems.[1]

What then, can we usefully discover from the plays about Shakespeare's attitude to public affairs, tc history in the broadest sense? It is a commonplace that any political attitude must have a class basis: it does not necessarily follow that any individual must reflect the attitude of any single class. And I do not think that Shakespeare reflected the attitude of any one social class or group

– feudal gentry, guild burgess, new bourgeoisie, or, still less, small master or artisan. He lived in a world alongside all of these and shares some of the prejudices, hopes and antipathies of them all.

Such a position was peculiarly possible to a man of Shakespeare's origin, education and profession, living in an age like the later sixteenth century. He was born in a prosperous, medium sized provincial town, of which his father was a prominent burgess (later he became less prosperous, which is probably why Shakespeare had to seek his fortune in London). Such a family often faced both ways: no great gulf divided it from the smaller independent craftsmen, yet Shakespeare's connections were respectable enough for the College of Heralds to be able to grant him a coat of arms with at least some show of plausibility.

The educational system of the time facilitated such a social ambiguity. This was the great age of the foundation and growth of the grammar school. It is still a matter of dispute if and how far the old educational structure had been impaired by the Reformation.[2] What is certain is that by Shakespeare's time any loss that might have been suffered had been more than made good. Indeed, a prominent Elizabethan educationalist, Richard Mulcaster, complained in 1581 that there were too many schools,[3] a view echoed by Bacon a generation later.[4] To these schools the sons of the country gentry, who previously would more probably have entered as pages in a great household, now went in increasing numbers. They studied alongside the sons of tradesmen and yeomen, as well as an entirely new social group – the sons of the clergy. This 'grammar learning' was the common heritage of virtually the whole literate population, and forms the cultural background of its theatre.

> Behind the national drama of the age of Shakespeare and James I, stands the school, the school curriculum and that method of approaching literature which was inculcated by masters in private and grammar schools and by private tutors. With that curriculum and that method the playwrights almost without exception, and the greater part of their audience, were familiar.[5]

Just as Shakespeare and his audience, whatever their class origin, shared a background and education that had important common elements, so his position as a practical man of the theatre tended to cut across class frontiers. The sixteenth-century

poet-actor lived in the interstices of the class structure, above, below and beyond the bourgeoisie from whom he commonly sprung. The theatre lay, socially as well as geographically, between feudal Westminster and mercantile London, in a disreputable Bohemia which it shared with the brothel and the bear garden. The players were at once vagabonds who could consider themselves lucky to 'scape a whipping', yet also the servants, and often favoured and intimate servants, of the highest nobility. Shakespeare's relations with the Earl of Southampton were certainly of this character.

This was not only an age of the foundation of new schools, but of a new curriculum, unmistakably if hesitantly moulded by the outlook of humanism. The result was a generation in which the medieval ideas of order and degree, of a static and hierarchical universe, were in conflict with new ideas of change and progress of social justice and the unfolding of new possibilities for humanity. Shakespeare, who had been brought up in the grammar learning, but not at the university, was a humanist of this sort, not an intellectual steeped in the classics, but a working actor-dramatist, widely read in the vernacular – into which the older classics as well as the contemporary literature of France and Italy were then being translated at an unprecedented pace – acquisitive and absorbent. He was not, as A.A. Smirnov points out, 'a closet humanist', but a humanist whose humanism had to stand the test of every day life.

> His reactions to the world around him, and to the changes in the political and social current of his time, were strong but complex. They found expression not in impulsive outbursts or obvious allusions to the evils of the times, but in profound internal upheavals and changed evaluations of humanity and the life process.[6]

Shakespeare, therefore, was able to reflect not the standpoint of any single class but the conflicts and contradictions, the hopes and despairs peculiar to an age standing on the threshold of revolution. For this reason I find the attempts of some Marxist critics (at various times) to pigeon-hole him as a representative of the bourgeoisie, of the declining feudalists, of the section of the nobility becoming bourgeois, or of any other particular social group, all unsatisfactory. The very fact that a more or less plausible case can be made for all these views is perhaps enough in itself to arouse a suspicion that their adherents are on the wrong

tack. Nor was the attempt of M. Levidov to present Shakespeare as a Machiavellian super-man any more convincing.[7]

Within these conflicts lies tragedy as he sees it. In *Lear, Timon, Coriolanus* and elsewhere he shows himself fully aware of the evils of his times, of poverty, exploitation, injustice, war. But though he sees them he can see no solution. The traditional society of feudalism is doomed and cannot recover. In any case he knows it too well to suppose that it has anything positive to offer – Hotspur, Hector, Coriolanus, the representatives of that past, are magnificent but futile figures. The new bourgeois forces are themselves the cause of much of the evil. There is not, and will not be for centuries, any revolutionary movement of the exploited. Shakespeare can see their convulsive revolts only as something negative and destructive. None the less he does advance from blank hostility when writing of Cade's insurrection in 1590 to a real if critical sympathy with the grievances of the Roman plebs in *Coriolanus*.

To a sensitive man of the sixteenth century, to More for example, the onset of the new mode of production appeared as a catastrophe. This was inevitable. What was immediately apparent was the destruction of the old, the ruin of ancient families, the corruption of old customs, the growing power of money and the unscrupulousness with which that power was exercised. These were the generations during which usury was ceasing to be a deadly sin and becoming a way of life. To More, to Shakespeare, this was a tragic situation: only the ignoble, the newly enriched, the merchant, the monopolist, the usurer could rejoice in what change could be seen. It was not yet possible to see 'the change beyond the change' which in the end made the new mode a step forward. If we expect Shakespeare to have been able to see it we expect the impossible.

So he was forced back, as More had been earlier, upon a moral solution, and his criticism of society was primarily a moral criticism. Yet how radical it was we can see from *Lear*, where, by putting the same sentiment into the mouth of both Lear and Gloucester, He justifies us, for once, in assuming with certainty that the sentiment is his own. Thus Lear:

> Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are,
> That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
> How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
> Your loop'd and window'd raggedness, defend you

From seasons such as these? Oh, I have ta'en
Too little care of this! Take physic, pomp;
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them
And show the heavens more just. (III, 4.)

And Gloucester:

Heavens, deal so still!
Let the superfluous and lust-dieted man,
That slaves your ordinance, that will not see
Because he doth not feel, feel your power quickly;
So distribution should undo excess
And each man have enough. (IV, 1.)

How truly radical this is may be appreciated by comparing it with the evident horror with which Spenser regards the same views put into the mouth of his Levelling giant:

Seest not how badly all things present be,
And each estate quite out of order goeth? ...
Were it not good that wrong were then surceast,
And from the most, that some were given to the Least? ...
Tyrants that make men subject to their law
I will suppress, that they no more may reign,
And lordlings curb, that commons over-awe;
And all the wealth of rich men to the poor will draw.[8]

It is easy to recognise which is the people's poet and which the poet of the aristocracy.

Yet Shakespeare can only put his hopes upon a change of heart, especially among the powerful, upon the efficacy of compassion, justice, loyalty and good faith. With our hindsight we can easily see that this was a utopian dream, that the immediate future lay with the new bourgeois exploiters. Yet all these are in themselves good things: confidence in the strength and possibility of human decency may be misplaced *in the short run* – in the long run it is the rock upon which we build our hope of a true society. It is in this sense that Shakespeare, like the other humanists of his day, can speak to our time and to the future.

The tragic and poetic tension in his work is the tension between two forms of society, two opposed worlds, at the very moment when that tension had reached its height and was about to break in open revolutionary conflict. Shakespeare could not resolve that

conflict – only history, life, could do that. But he felt and expressed it in the highest degree and with an incomparable command of language, and he can communicate it to us. That is why we, standing at a new and even more absolute dividing point of time, can perhaps understand and appreciate him as no previous generation has been in a position to do.

II Kingship and the Birth of a Nation

The rise of the bourgeoisie in the sixteenth century created an English nation. The Reformation, replacing a supra-national with a national church, the emergence of England as the leader of the Protestant forces of Europe, the progressive national struggle against Spain and the sense of purpose and mission which that struggle engendered, all form part of this process. One outcome was a new interest in history, not as a mere record of events but as having a meaning and conveying lessons of practical value. This new sense of history is embodied in the contemporary chronicles, on which Shakespeare drew so freely for his plays, and is nowhere better expressed than in *Henry IV, Part 2*:

> There is a history in all men's lives,
> Figuring the nature of the times deceased;
> The which observed, a man may prophesy,
> With a near aim, of the main chance of things
> As yet not come to life, which in their seeds
> And weak beginnings lie intreasured.
> Such things become the hatch and brood of time. (III. 1.)

It is not surprising, therefore, that when Shakespeare began to work in the theatre about 1590, he turned first to the field of chronicle plays dealing with English history.

He may well have embarked upon the sequence *Henry VI* to *Richard III* for any one of a variety of almost accidental reasons: to satisfy an immediate popular demand, or to use up old material. But he put his best thought about English history into them, and they are his interpretation of how the Tudor, national state came into being. When, later on, as a mature and well-established dramatist, he came to write his second historical Tetralogy (*Richard II, Henry IV, Henry V*, 1595–9) I can see no sufficient reason for his doing so other than that he felt impelled to complete his historical picture.

The two series taken as a whole, and there can be little doubt that they were meant to be taken as a whole, give as full an explanation as his sources and the dramatic medium allow of the whole range of modern history – a narrative, an exposition of principles (causation, order and degree, kingship, the relation of human affairs to the cosmic or divine forces, etc.) and a gallery of typical figures to illustrate social change as he saw it.

Shakespeare's choice of period for his history sequence was not accidental. In the series of plays which begins with *Richard II* he covered what was for him and his generation the core of modern history. Earlier times were for them barbarous and obscure, the period since Bosworth was contemporary history, perilous ground for historian or dramatist. But in the deposition and tragedy of Richard II Shakespeare could see the beginning of what was for him the 'modern' world, the train of events leading to the new, national, Tudor monarchy and the new pattern of life. He interpreted the past in the light of the Tudor political settlement, and his view of this was coloured by what he knew, or thought he knew, of the fifteenth century.

In *Richard II* he presented a formal picture, stylised like a tapestry or illumination, of the old world of the high Middle Ages. Richard is 'that sweet lovely rose', a comparison that is at once an expression of a certain regretful admiration and a criticism of his inadequacy as a king. With his deposition the established order is shattered and a new age begins, dominated by new kinds of men, practical, realistic, hard and unprincipled, the kind of men in fact whom Shakespeare saw uppermost in his own time. The formal pattern dissolves into a kaleidoscope picture of English life in *Henry IV*, and, as the curse of the usurpation of Bolingbroke works itself out, this hardens into a new pattern of dissention, defeat abroad, seemingly unending civil war, and, finally, the monstrous tyranny of Richard III and the synthesis of Bosworth, after which normality and order is reasserted. We need not concern ourselves with the question of how far this pattern corresponds to actual historical fact. The point is that it was Shakespeare's pattern and one which was imaginatively convincing to his audience.

If we find it difficult to accept Shakespeare's interpretation of history, we must remember that all interpretations of this period now seem naïvely moralistic. Shakespeare accepts the pattern

drawn by Hall and Polydore Virgil of crime, counter-crime and resolution. He really believed in the possibility of an inherited curse and of the sins of the fathers being visited upon the children. His audience shared these beliefs. Yet there is a dualism, even a contradiction, in his plays between the divine and superhuman elements working out curse and retribution and the human and quite rational forces through which they take effect. Shakespeare seems at times uncertain which is the real motive force, but it may be significant that it is in the early plays that the superhuman forces seem strongest. As he matured the human and rational gained ground, and in his greatest plays his theme is, in the last analysis, the secular and humanist one of man shaping events, making his own history.

We have equally no reason to doubt that Shakespeare is sincere in his panegyric of Tudor monarchy, as when he writes:

> Good grows with her: [*Elizabeth*]
> In her days every man shall eat in safety
> Under his own vine what he plants: and sing
> The merry songs of peace to all his neighbours.
> God shall be truly known; and those about her
> From her shall read the perfect ways of honour,
> And by those claim their greatness, not by blood.[9]

Monarchy for the sixteenth century meant a strong, central government as opposed to chaos and anarchy, and the Wars of the Roses were still recent history. Civil strife, under the conditions of decaying feudalism, meant the resumption of fruitless gang wars between rival factions of the nobility. This was something no sensible person wanted, certainly not Shakespeare, who had drawn so vivid a picture of its consequences. In this respect he certainly reflects the outlook which had gained strength with the growth of the bourgeoisie. It was an outlook essentially national, and, in the conditions of the time, the monarchy, whatever its shortcomings, was the only possible focal point for this nationalism. And monarchy in the late sixteenth century was therefore a popular monarchy, reflecting the progressive part England was then playing in world politics.

It is not surprising, then, that kingship and the concept of kingship is so prominent in all Shakespeare's chronicle plays. We are presented with a brilliant gallery of typical representatives of kingship, their qualities personified in the traditional emblematic

style which his audience would easily recognise. Thus we have Richard II, the rose, in whom the elegant and ceremonial aspect of kingship preponderated. He has only the outward show, not the reality of power, and it is his inadequacy which sets in motion the whole tragic course of events. His supplanter Bolingbroke (Henry IV) is the fox – in him craft and policy outweigh all other qualities. He is a more efficient king than Richard but his crime is greater and, in the end, produces more terrible consequences. Henry V and Edward IV are the sun kings: in them the element of power predominates, and between them comes the saintly Henry VI, the pelican, the most virtuous and the most disastrous of all. His famous shepherd soliloquy[10] illustrates his unfitness for kingship no less than his goodness as a man. Finally the sequence ends with Richard III, the usurper and tyrant from whom kingly qualities are so entirely absent that he may justly be opposed and removed.

This, of course, presented a real problem for a sixteenth century writer. Shakespeare had been brought up in, and I think in general accepted, the Tudor orthodoxy of the necessity of order and the absolute sinfulness of rebellion: yet the Tudor dynasty was itself the product of a rebellion that had to be justifed. This could only be done by showing that Richard III was a monster, a usurper and no true king. Today this view has been widely questioned by historians, but if any one had any such doubts in Shakespeare's time he kept them to himself. There is no evidence to suggest that Shakespeare had any such doubts. Yet very strange and contradictory things were happening to the conception of kingship in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

Feudal society had recognised, at least in theory, the right of the vassal to renounce his allegiance as a last resort, that is to say, it recognised the right to rebellion for the ruling aristocracy. This did not extend, of course, to the lower orders. The sixteenth century doctrine that even an evil ruler ought not to be resisted reflects, to a certain extent, the recognition by the bourgeoisie of the realities of feudal conditions, under which the power of an evil or unscrupulous ruler was still less harmful to the masses than a weakening of the central authority, which exposed them to private war and indiscriminate exactions. We can note in Shakespeare the extreme reluctance of the Scottish nobles to make war even upon Macbeth, who, like Richard III, had to be presented in an extraordinary light as monster and tyrant to justify such resistance.

In the sixteenth century all the conflicting and localised loyalties which had characterised the earlier feudalism were being broken down and Leviathan was being born.

One of the paradoxical consequences of the rise of the bourgeoisie and of the idea of nationality is the final victory of the principle of strictly hereditary over elective monarchy. In early feudal times the two conceptions ran side by side because the king was *primus* but also *inter pares*. The head of the new national state had to be *sui generis*. The nation, developing with the growth of the bourgeoisie, required a greater degree of stability than elective monarchy provided. From about the fourteenth century the hereditary principles gained ground at the expense of the elective and by Shakespeare's time the idea of elective monarchy was not only dead but forgotten. For him John had usurped the throne rightfully belonging to his nephew, an idea which would have been quite foreign to the men of John's time. Now the king had attained a divinity that to seem divine had also to seem to have been eternal. A faint trace of the old order may perhaps be seen in the right of the nobility to speak to the monarch plainly and roughly at need, as Kent does to Lear: it is one of the signs of Lear's growing unwisdom that he resents this frankness.

Yet the new status which the monarch attained in the sixteenth century was from the start insecure. The new kind of interest in history which we can see, with the people as a positive force with rights and duties, leads directly towards revolutionary crisis. The fact that this happened at the same time as the new conception of monarchy made accommodation and compromise more difficult, and the conflict, when it came, sharper and more absolute. With the breaking up of feudalism two new and incompatible ideologies were developing. This was not understood at the time – both sides appealed to what they conceived to be the ancient laws and good customs of the realm in defence of what were really revolutionary innovations.

In Shakespeare we can see not only something of this contradiction but perhaps a change in his attitude, especially marked in the plays written after about 1600. Earlier he had voiced the orthodox views of the paramount need for authority and the wickedness of rebellion, nowhere more clearly than in the passage, now generally credited to him, in the play *Sir Thomas More* and probably written about 1595:

Grant them removed, and grant that this your noise
Hath chid down all the majesty of England;
Imagine that you see the wretched strangers,
Their babies at their backs, with their poor luggage,
Plodding to the ports and coasts for transportation,
And that you sit as kings in your desires,
Authority quite silenced by your brawl
And you in ruff of your opinions clothed,–
What have you got? I'll tell you, you have taught
How insolence and strong hand should prevail,
How order should be quelled, and by this pattern
Not one of you should live an aged man.
For other ruffians as their fancies wrought
With self same hand, self reasons and self right,
Would shark on you, and men like ravenous fishes
Would feed on one another. (Sc. 6.)

Even here a curious qualification may be noted. Lines 3–5 of this passage are, I think, a deliberate and unmistakable echo of the famous passage in More's *Utopia* describing the plight of the victims of enclosures: 'They must needes depart awaye, poore, silly wretched soules, men, women, husbands, wives, fatherlesse children, widows, woeful mothers, with their younge babes, and their whole household small in substance and much in number.' If so, we must infer that Shakespeare is taking this opportunity to remind us that he is aware of social injustice as well as the need for authority.

From about 1600 his conviction of the paramount importance of order and authority seems to have weakened. We can note the much greater sympathy with which popular tumult is treated in *Coriolanus*, the contrast between the humanist radicalism of Hamlet and the traditional statecraft of Claudius and Polonius. And while disorder is still presented in *Lear* as opening the road to every kind of evil, the abuse of authority is shown as an evil in itself and one which corrupts the whole fabric of the commonwealth:

There thou mightest behold the great image of authority:
a dog's obeyed in office ...
Plate sin with gold,
And the strong lance of justice hurtless breaks;
Arm it in rags, a pigmy's sword does pierce it. (IV, 6.)

The central theme of *Lear* is that of the king whose eyes are opened to reality by experience of the depths of suffering and poverty.

Shakespeare was a supporter of kingship: no other attitude was in practice possible to a man of his time, yet his support was not uncritical. If we examine the attitude to kingship which runs through all the history plays and appears more incidentally elsewhere we find that support for the principle of monarchy as it then existed does not prevent the keenest understanding of kingship in its practical application. Henry V has usually been regarded, with some justice, as Shakespeare's portrait of the ideal hero-king: yet generations of readers have found him far from perfect, and indeed positively distasteful as a man, and as a king his policy proved disastrous. There are some grounds for thinking that Shakespeare was not unaware of this. He saw also the need for a positive relationship, not one of mere subordination, between king and people. As his genius matured and the crisis of the age developed his criticism of authority grew sharper and his sense of social injustice keener.

III Shakespeare and War

When Shakespeare came to London, England had been at war for some years and was to remain at war for many more. It is not surprising, therefore, that war occupies so prominent a part in his history plays, as well as in a number of others. We shall find here also that his attitude was complex and changed markedly between the early and later plays.

About internal war there is little that need be said. Shakespeare regarded this as an unmixed evil, perhaps the worst from which a nation could suffer. As we have seen in the case of Richard III and Macbeth, resistance to any lawful authority could only be justified by the most extraordinary circumstances. Foreign war was a different matter.

In his very first play (*Henry VI, Part 1*) the central theme is the loss of France in the last stages of the Hundred Years' War. Shakespeare deplores the disunity and mismanagement which led to defeat, the single-hearted soldiers, Salisbury and Talbot, are naïvely heroic and no doubts are expressed about the justice of the English cause. In this Shakespeare is probably expressing the

general view of his time. We have to remember that this war was still a fairly recent memory – little more distant than the Crimean War is from us or Waterloo from the generation of 1914. That is to say, while it was not within living memory, there were still many who had heard accounts of it from actual participants. In a time when men depended less on written records and more on oral tradition than we do, it would probably be a more living memory, and, till the Armada year of 1588, England had not been involved in any major foreign war that could blur this memory.

In one respect Shakespeare gives a picture of the Hundred Years' War that has coloured and distorted popular views ever since. Reading back into the fifteenth century the developments of his own days, he portrayed it as a national rather than a feudal war, rather perhaps in the way Eisenstein recreated the epic of Alexander Nevsky in the light of the events of his time. This makes for effective drama though for doubtful history. A climax of absurdity is reached in *Henry V* with its four 'typical' soldiers, Gower the Englishman, Fluellen the Welshman, Jamy the Scot and MacMorris the Irishman. The implication of a 'British' nation is not only absurd for the fifteenth century but almost equally so for Shakespeare's own time, while even today the national position of Wales and Scotland is still a controversial matter and no one would deny that Ireland has always been a totally distinct nation.

In rather the same way Shakespeare distorts the historical position of Gaunt and York in *Richard II*. Here they are shown as types of the old feudal nobility, grave, responsible, substantial, in contrast to Richard who is the courtier noble – frivolous, cynical, Italianate, who appeared in the late feudal period with the Renaissance absolutism. Shakespeare not only idealises the old aristocracy, who were in truth a bloody and ruthless crew, but errs historically in giving them a national consciousness. The Gaunt of history, with one foot in England, the other in Spain, could never have spoken in the way Shakespeare makes him do about

> This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,
> This other Eden, demi-paradise;
> This fortress built by Nature for itself. (II. 1.)

This is an attitude of the late sixteenth century which had just seen the defeat of a sea-borne invasion, not of fourteenth-century

feudal magnates whose ambition was to win new territory in France or Spain. So far, then, Shakespeare's attitude to war appears one of approval and patriotic pride.

In *Henry IV, Part 1* a new note is struck. Here we meet war not as something heroically imagined but as a reality affecting the lives of common men. Falstaff describes his company:

> My whole charge consists of ancients, corporals, lieutenants, gentlemen of companies, slaves as ragged as Lazarus in the painted cloth, where the glutton's dogs licked his sores; and such as indeed were never soldiers, but discarded unjust servingmen, younger sons to younger brothers, revolted tapsters, and ostlers trade-fallen; the cankers of a calm world and a long peace. (IV, 2.)[11]

He adds:

> Good enough to toss; food for powder, food for powder; they'll fill a pit as well as better: tush, man, mortal men, mortal men.

And a little later we are told:

> I have led my ragamuffins where they are peppered: there's not three of my hundred and fifty left alive; and they are for the town's end, to beg during life. (V, 3.)

When Shakespeare contrasts the Talbots with Falstaff's ragged army and corrupt recruiting methods he is contrasting the unknown and idealised high-feudal past with the known present. He did not know how feudal armies were raised: he and his audience knew how armies were raised, and thrown away, in the sixteenth century. They had all seen the crippled soldier begging at the town's end. In *Henry IV* we are constantly aware of the contrast between the imagined past and the intrusion of the unheroic present. Yet Shakespeare lived through the Armada crisis, in what now seems to us a heroic time. Are we to conclude that all ages are heroic, though they seem not to be so at the time, or that all are unheroic even though seeming heroic at a distance, or that heroic and unheroic are commonly so entangled as often to be found together not only in the same age but in the same man?

In *Henry V* we certainly seem at first sight to return to the heroic. Everyone knows the famous set pieces glorifying war and the soldier's trade. We need not doubt that they were written sincerely and that Shakespeare's audience rose to them. Yet when we examine the play more closely, contradictory and disturbing features emerge.

In particular the question of the justice of England's war with France is raised for the first time. There is, indeed, a hint at the close of *Henry IV* where the dying king advises his heir that justice is not the only thing to be considered:

> Therefore, my Harry
> Be it thy course to busy giddy minds
> With foreign quarrels; that action, hence borne out,
> May waste the memory of the former days. (IV, 5.)

As *Henry V* opens the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of Ely are discovered discussing the threat to confiscate church property and planning a counter-measure. In the next scene the Archbishop delivers a long discourse to the King to justify his claim to the French throne and advises him to press it, advice which Henry is only too eager to accept.

Today the whole thing appears entirely cynical, but we cannot be certain that Shakespeare, and still less his audience, saw it in the same way. No doubt the bishops, being Papists, could be permitted to use dishonest arguments, and a London sixteenth-century audience, always thoroughly anti-clerical, would relish a thrust at the church. But the fact that Henry renewed the war for unavowed reasons, and on advice corruptly given, does not necessarily mean that his claim could not be justified. Also, the sixteenth-century attitude to war was very different from our own. War was still regarded, if as in a sense an evil, as a proper and natural instrument of national policy. Once you could persuade yourself that you had a just cause, it could be presented as glorious, not as a tragic necessity. Hotspur in *Henry IV* and the Bastard in *King John* stand for an older and still widely held view that war is the proper occupation of a gentleman. There is nothing to suggest that Shakespeare shared this opinion: about the justice of England's cause in France he may well have had some reservations.

After Agincourt Henry sees in victory the hand of God

justifying his cause – just as Cromwell did centuries after. This is a dangerous and double-edged argument, as Milton had come to realise when he wrote *Samson Agonistes*, and Shakespeare's audience hardly needed the reminder of the transitory nature of these successes with which he ended his play:

> Henry the Sixth, in infant bands crown'd King
> Of France and England, did this king succeed;
> Whose state so many had the managing,
> That they lost France and made his England bleed:
> Which oft our stage hath shown. (*Henry V*, Epilogue.)

The failure would be, indeed, fresher in the Elizabethan mind than the victories. This theme of the justice of the war is taken up again when Henry, disguised, says, rather smugly we feel, to some of his soldiers on the eve of battle: 'Methinks I could not die anywhere so contented as in the king's company; his cause being just and his quarrel honourable.'

To which the soldier Williams replies:

> That's more than we know ... But if the cause be not good, the king himself hath a heavy reckoning to make, when all those legs and arms and heads, chopped off in a battle, shall join together at the latter day and cry all 'We died at such a place'; some swearing, some crying for a surgeon, some upon their wives left poor behind them, some upon the debts they owe, some upon their children rawly left. I am afeard there are few died well that die in a battle; for how can they charitably dispose of anything, when blood is their argument? Now, if these men die not well, it will be a black matter for the king that led them to it; whom to disobey were against all proportion of subjection. (IV, 1.)

Once again the question is left undecided. Certainly Henry's reply is unconvincing and slides evasively over Williams' arguments. Elsewhere in the play one may note the emphasis on the sordid aspects of war in the scenes showing the plundering and cowardice of Pistol and his friends, and the Duke of Burgundy's eloquent picture of war's destructiveness with which it ends.[12]

If the attitude to war disclosed in *Henry V* is much more complex than at first appears, the contrast between *Henry V* and *Troilus and Cressida* – written only three years later – is really striking. We have to remember that since the Armada year, 1588, England had been continously at war with Spain. The war had opened with immense enthusiasm and a resounding victory, it had

seemed to many Englishmen a crusade against Popery and reaction. But by the end of the century it was dragging out miserably, with no prospect of a decision. Disunity among the leaders and mere incompetence had led to failure after failure. The decision in 1604 to make peace was on the whole both wise and popular.[13]

It is easy to see how topical, in 1602, a play set towards the end of the long siege of Troy might be, and I think that *Troilus and Cressida* is the most topical of all Shakespeare's plays. This may be one of the reasons why it is dramatically unsatisfactory. Shakespeare was perhaps too close to his theme to get it into proper perspective, and the result is a rather confused close-up on the wretchedness of war. In the Greek camp we see the feuds and jealousies of the leaders, mirroring exactly those of the English court and armed forces at the end of the century. The statesmanship is coldly cynical, the heroics stupid and suicidal, the fighting conducted more with the mouth than the sword, all human relationships have grown coarse and trivial under the stress of war. At the end Hector, the fine knight whose very high-mindedness has doomed his city to destruction, is caught unarmed and brutally slaughtered at the command of Achilles.[14] And for this dreary picture of a war turned sour Shakespeare deliberately chose one of the great heroic stories of the world and a conflict traditionally ideal. It is as if he selected the most romantic symbol he could find to destroy the romantic view of war.

The whole play is marked by a terrible yet objective bitterness, with Pandarus and Thersites forming a mocking chorus. Like Falstaff they are anti-heroes, but without that core of healthy life which redeems him from complete ignominy. Yet Shakespeare does not mock with them, nor condemn men and women as such. Rather he condemns the evil circumstances which drive decent, honourable people to such straits. They are victims of war, of 'the times' against which Hamlet had railed in the play written only a year earlier.

For with *Troilus and Cressida* Shakespeare had entered his third period, that of the great tragedies. In a number of these the criticism of war finds a place. Hamlet's approbation of the military adventures of Fortinbras should not prevent us from detecting the irony with which Shakespeare writes of:

> The imminent death of twenty thousand men,

That for a fantasy and trick of fame
Go to their graves like beds, fight for a plot
Whereon the numbers cannot try the cause,
Which is not tomb enough and continent
To hide the slain? (IV, 4.)

And he shows every sympathy with the disinclination of the Roman plebs to provide the pile of corpses on which Coriolanus can act the conqueror. We know nothing of this change in Shakespeare except what we can deduce from the plays themselves read in the context of the years in which they were being produced. And of course we know nothing of any personal factors that may have influenced him. Yet it seems permissible to suppose, taking into account the general shift towards plays of darkness and social criticism during the early years of the seventeenth century, that much of the reason for Shakespeare's sharp change from the cheerful patriotism of *Henry IV* and *Henry V* and the relative light-heartedness of the comedies of the same years to a bleaker mood and a growing realisation of social injustice must be connected with the change in the relation of class forces which was taking place in those years. This is now widely recognised, but I think we should add also the experience of a war begun with great hopes that had grown pointless and wearisome.[15] From his experience of this particular war Shakespeare would seem to have advanced to a condemnation of war in general and a criticism of society which had to make use of such a method of settling its differences.

Notes

1. L.C. Knights, *Party Politics and the English Tradition*, London 1954, p. 8.
2. See Joan Simon, 'A.F. Leach on the Reformation', *British Journal of Educational Studies*, Vol. 3 No. 2 and Vol. 4 No. 1.
3. *Positions*, Ch.37.
4. James Spedding, *Life and Letters of Bacon*, London 1861–74, Vol. IV, pp. 252–3.
5. L.C. Knights, 'Education and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare', *Criterion*, July 1932.
6. A.A. Smirnov, *Shakespeare*, New York 1936, pp. 25–6. In fact, obvious allusions to social evils are by no means uncommon in his writings.

7. M. Levidov, 'Three Shakespeares', *European Quarterly*, February 1935.
8. *Faerie Queen*, Book V, Canto 2.
9. *Henry VIII*, Act V, Scene 5. It may be worth noting that when Shakespeare wrote this, Elizabeth had been dead nearly ten years.
10. *Henry VI*, Part 3, Act II, Scene 5.
11. This description is so close to Cromwell's of the early Parliamentary army as 'most of them old decayed serving men, and tapsters, and such kind of fellows', that one is tempted to guess that Cromwell in his unregenerate days at the Inns of Court may have seen a performance of *Henry IV*. At least it shows that Falstaff's picture was not mere caricature.
12. Act V, Scene 2.
13. This is not to say that the subsequent policy of alliance with, and subservience to, Spain was either wise or popular.
14. Four years earlier, in 1598, Chapman had dedicated his translation of Homer's *Iliad* to the Earl of Essex, 'the most honoured now living instance of the Achillean virtues'. Essex was now dead, and Shakespeare surely identified his tragedy with that of Hector. There seems no inherent reason for introducing Hector's death into the play.
15. We should remember also the savage, futile and even more costly war which was fought in Ireland throughout a great part of Elizabeth's reign. It was this war which led, indirectly, to the downfall of the Earl of Essex.

Francis Bacon – Philosopher of Nature

Francis Bacon belonged to one of the new families so typical of England in the sixteenth century. His grandfather was a prosperous Suffolk yeoman farmer, who grew rich, speculated shrewdly in church lands after the Reformation and was able to send his son to the University and put him to the law – almost the only field in which a man outside the aristocracy could then rise to great fortune and position. This son, Sir Nicholas Bacon, reached the top of the legal bureaucracy, and Francis was therefore reared at the court of Elizabeth I and destined from the start to a career in the service of the crown.

Yet Francis Bacon was never merely the courtier and bureaucrat and the contradiction which marked his whole character and career and which makes him such a brilliant and fascinating figure showed itself at the very outset. At Cambridge University, to which he was sent as the modern and reforming university of his day, he came to a remarkable conclusion which coloured his whole life. His secretary, Dr William Rawley, tells us:

> While he was commorant in the university, about sixteen years of age, as his lordship hath been pleased to impart unto myself, he first fell into the dislike of the philosophy of Aristotle: not for the worthlessness of the author, to whom he would ever ascribe all high attributes, but for the unfruitfulness of the way; being a philosophy (as his lordship used to say) only strong for disputations and contentions, but barren of the production of works for the benefit of the life of man; in which mind he continued to his dying day.

The objection was less to Aristotle than to the set of dogmas into which Aristotelianism had been ossified by medieval thought, to Aristotelianism as the philosophy of feudal society. Bacon was a

man of the new age of the rising bourgeoisie, who demanded from philosophy, or science as men were just beginning to call it, not a system of metaphysics but 'the production of works for the benefit of the life of man'. Knowledge was to be a social weapon. Bacon's ruling idea, as Professor Farrington says,

> is simply that knowledge ought to bear fruit in works, that science ought to be applicable to industry, that men ought to organise themselves as a sacred duty to improve and transform the conditions of life.

From this conviction he never deviated and all his important writing centres upon it.

As a man of the new age Bacon shared fully its difficulties and contradictions, and in his particular generation they were perhaps at their zenith. Capitalism in agriculture and industry was growing within feudal society, but at first it grew under the shelter of the monarchy: the bourgeoisie was not yet ready to claim political power on its own behalf. But Bacon lived precisely at the moment when the decisive shift was taking place, and by the end of his life the alliance between crown and bourgeoisie was already breaking. His political fall was, indeed, a consequence of that break. Of this change he seems to have been unaware and to have remained throughout content to play the courtier, to seek office and perquisites and to participate without any conscious humiliation in all the meanness and corruption which his way of life entailed. For this he cannot perhaps be blamed: it was the way in which he was reared and he knew no other, yet it often involved him in actions which seem glaringly at odds with the high professions of his philosophic creed.

Behind this contradiction was another, still more profound, which lies at the very heart of humanism. Humanism fought to free man from superstition and ignorance, but also to free production from the restraints of feudal economy: the bourgeois revolution was waged for the ultimate advance of mankind as a whole, but also to secure for a new class the power to exploit and grow rich, and in this revolution meanness and nobility, cruel oppression and enlightened generosity are inextricably tangled. Of these elements Bacon's character seems also to be compounded.

So we find him, without conscious incongruity, prostrating himself before the great and lending his talents to the support of

oppressive policies while yet voicing in *The True Greatness of England* his hope of a commonwealth.

> Whose wealth resteth in the hands of merchants, burgers, tradesmen, freeholders, farmers and the like; whereof we have a most evident and present example before our eyes, in our neighbours of the Low Countries, who could never have endured and continued so inestimable and insupportable charges, either by their natural frugality or by their mechanical industry, were it not also that their wealth was dispersed in many hands, and not engrossed in few; and those hands were not so much of the nobility, but most and generally of inferior conditions.

If his ultimate concern was the establishment of a new philosophy, his immediate energies were occupied with a personal struggle to ascend the political ladder. The death of his father while he was still a minor left him with only a younger son's portion and no settled career. His powerful kinsmen the Cecils were for some reason unhelpful and in his search for a patron he attached himself to the Earl of Essex. When Essex fell from favour he managed to disengage himself adroitly in a way his admirers have never found it easy to defend. It was not till the death of Elizabeth I and the accession of James I that he really began to prosper. From 1607 he climbed rapidly till in 1618 he became Lord Chancellor and was soon after raised to the peerage as Viscount St Albans.

His fall was even more rapid. Always in search of a patron, he had now attached himself to the Duke of Buckingham, and when, in 1621, the Commons wished to attack Buckingham but dared not do so directly, they struck at him through Bacon. Charged with corruption, deserted by his patron, he was dismissed, fined and imprisoned. Though these latter penalties were soon remitted, his political life was over and till his death in 1626 he lived in retirement devoting himself entirely to his literary and philosophical work. It should perhaps be added that though the charges against him were clearly proved he was no more guilty than other public figures – certainly no more guilty than the majority of those who condemned him.

These details about his public career have to be given if we are to understand Bacon and his time: they can give little pleasure to his admirers and are certainly not the reason why he is remembered today. If we honour him after four hundred years, it

is not of the learned Chancellor and the man of affairs that we think, but of the philosopher who declared:

> The end of our foundation is the knowledge of causes and secret motions of things, and the enlarging of the bounds of human empire to the effecting of all things possible.

He revolutionised philosophy by directing it outwards to the objective world of things. Man could only increase his knowledge, and his power over his environment, by studying nature:

> For the wit and mind of man, if it work upon matter, which is the contemplation of the creatures of God, worketh according to the stuff and is limited thereby; but if it work upon itself, as the spider worketh its web, then it is endless, and brings forth indeed cobwebs of learning, admirable for the fineness of the thread and work, but of no substance or profit.

His whole quarrel with his predecessors, both Greeks and Schoolmen, was that they looked inward, whereas all true knowledge must come from observation and experiment. Plato's idealism is condemned even more harshly than Aristotle's metaphysic:

> When you asserted that truth is, as it were, the native inhabitant of the human mind and does not come from outside in order to take up its abode there; when you turned our minds away from observation and away from things, to which it is impossible that they should ever be sufficiently attentive and obedient; when you taught us to turn our minds inward and grovel before our own blind and confused idols under the name of contemplative philosophy; then truly you dealt us a mortal injury.

Bacon therefore set to work, in a great series of books, both Latin and English, to outline the method by which the conquest of nature through the mastery of natural law might be accomplished. He set himself vast projects which were never completed, which no one mind *could* have completed, and his work survives like a splendid ruin in whose fragments the ground-plan of a palace for humanity can be discovered. Scientific knowledge was too little advanced in his day for the kind of construction of which he dreamed to be possible, and he himself was not always informed of the best knowledge which then existed. But he did at least lay

down certain principles which have been permanently fruitful and entitle him to be regarded as the father of modern materialism.

First of these, perhaps, is the principle that the pursuit of knowledge is an active, not a passive process. Nature will not yield her secrets merely to contemplation, they must be forced from her. Nature must be worked upon, 'vexed' in Bacon's phrase, and every new level of material culture sets man to devise new and appropriate experiments. He learns not by thinking abstractly but by thinking about what has been revealed by acting.

From this he deduced that the philosopher ought to concern himself with the mechanical or industrial processes. Hitherto these had been neglected as too base to deserve the attention of the learned, and where progress had been made it had been made empirically by the actual craftsmen engaged upon production. Much had been learned thus, but progress had been slow and uneven. Only if the arts and crafts and the actual techniques of production were systematically studied could a rapid advance be made. One of the tasks which Bacon set himself was the compilation of a universal encyclopaedia of nature, a task, naturally, beyond even his capacity, though we can see what he had in mind from the description of Solomon's House in *The New Atlantis*. Another project he put forward was the establishment of a great library, a botanical and zoological garden, a museum of natural science and a laboratory equipped for every sort of experiment.

Related to the conception of learning as an activity is the conception of practice as the test of truth. 'What is most useful in practice is most correct in theory', he wrote, and:

> In natural philosophy practical results are not only the means to improve human well-being. They are also the guarantee of truth. There is a true rule in religion, that a man must show his faith by his works. The same rule holds good in natural philosophy. Science too must be known by its works. It is by the witness of works rather than by logic or even observation that truth is revealed and established.

It is only to be expected that there should be limitations in Bacon's thought and method. He gravely underestimated the complexity of the universe and the effort that would be needed to comprehend it, even suggesting that all essential knowledge could be contained within a single large book. He stood at the beginning

of the first period of materialism when it was confidently supposed that the whole universe, from the solar system to the mind of man, was merely a vast and complex machine which could be mastered absolutely by a sufficient understanding of the laws of mechanics. To him and to his generation everything was both larger and simpler than life.

Yet he did not fall into the error of thinking that mechanical progress was in itself good, or an end, or would automatically add to human well-being. Man must choose to make proper use of it. From the same source which enriches life, he says in *The Wisdom of the Ancients*,

> come instruments of lust and also instruments of death. For ... the most exquisite poisons, as well as guns, and such like engines of destruction, are the fruits of mechanical invention; and well we know how far in cruelty and destruction they exceed the Minotaur himself.

This is something that we in the age of atomic power are better able to appreciate than Bacon himself.

Bacon's bold speculations evoked little response in his lifetime, and it required a revolution he would have abhorred to give them any practical effect, and then only on a limited scale. It was in fact under the Long Parliament in 1645 that the 'College of Philosophy' was founded by Samuel Hartlib, the Czech scholar Comenius and others, who admitted that their inspiration had been derived from *The New Atlantis*. After the Restoration of 1660 the College of Philosophy was merged into the Royal Society, and once again Sprat, Boyle, and others declared that this was an attempt to put into practice Bacon's vision of Solomon's House. If the Royal Society was in many respects a pale reflection of Bacon's original, it is true that in its early years at least a great deal of attention was paid by its Fellows to the practical crafts and the needs of industry.

It was in the eighteenth century, when Europe was on the eve of its next great revolutionary leap forward, that Diderot and d'Alembert embarked on their projects of the great *Encyclopaedia*. Here, once more, the debt to Bacon was direct and was acknowledged by Diderot in the *Prospectus*:

> If we have come at it successfully, we shall owe most to the Chancellor Bacon, who threw out the plan of an universal dictionary of sciences and arts, at a time when, so to say, neither arts nor sciences existed. That extraordinary genius, when it was impossible to write a history of what was known, wrote one of what it was necessary to know.

Since that time the sciences have advanced beyond even the limits of Bacon's imagination, and have attained a complexity of which he could not have dreamed, and with this very advance we have ceased to look upon him in a direct sense as a teacher or inspirer. His writings have become historical monuments. This is inevitable, but we shall do well to remember that it is so only because we have moved so far along the path which he was the first to point out for us.

Utopia Yesterday and Today

Utopia, as the name implies, is an imaginary and not necessarily an ideal commonwealth, but the idea of Utopia could hardly have arisen until the possibility of an ideal commonwealth, or at least of one more nearly ideal than any existing society, could be envisaged. In feudal society such a conception was impossible, since, though change could not of course in fact be avoided, it was regarded with suspicion. The feudal ideal was a static, hierarchic system, in which everyone had a rigidly defined status with recognised rights and obligations. Change was dangerous and ought to be avoided as far as possible. The best hope was that a regression into chaos could be prevented, and this was felt to demand a rigid discipline in which feudal lord and feudal church combined to keep serf and burgess in their appointed stations. Under these conditions the nearest approach to utopian thought as we understand it was the fantasy of the lower orders, a topsy-turvy dream world in which the need to toil was abolished and a magical abundance could be enjoyed by all. In most parts of Europe we can find traces of such a fantasy, taking many names and shapes, which may be generalised as the myth of Cokaygne. Such fantasies, naturally, did not commend themselves to, and were scarcely noticed by, the privileged or literate.

It is no accident, therefore, that Utopia coincides with the rise of the bourgeoisie within and in opposition to decaying feudal society, or that it arises directly out of humanism, the ideology of this new class. The humanists rejected the reactionary and pessimistic outlook of feudal Catholicism, an outlook that saw this world only as a preparation for the next, man as a wretched creature tied and bound by the chain of his sins and existing society only as the poor echo of a more glorious past whose relics they saw around them. The humanists rejected, in effect if not explicitly,

the dogma of original sin. They saw in the great advances in the technique of production, in man's ability to control his environment and his fate, the grounds for confidence in future human progress. The *idea* of progress was accepted because the *fact* of progress was for the first time unmistakable. They believed that man was capable of finding happiness on earth by his own efforts and by the exercise of reason. They saw man and nature not as an opposition but as a unity.

For the first time man became the measure, and the best among the humanists believed that the advance of the bourgeois order, which they tended to see rather as the triumph of a body of ideas, was the advance of humanity as a whole, breaking the chain of the past and entering upon a new freedom in which all could share. And in a sense, of course, they were justified. Yet here we approach the basic contradiction of humanism: that the bourgeoisie was indeed a progressive, but also an exploiting class, that while bourgeois society was an advance upon feudal society, it laid new burdens upon the masses.

The humanists looked for an epoch of peace and progress. In reality the fifteenth century opened a series of wars more destructive than any in the past, an age of peasant rebellions drowned in blood, of wholesale expropriations and the creation of vast slum populations living on the verge of starvation, of the plunder and extermination of colonial peoples throughout the world. The help of the masses was indeed enlisted by the bourgeoisie to destroy the feudal order, but their expectations were inevitably disappointed. So the age was at once an age of new hopes, and of new despair as these hopes were continually frustrated.

It was with this background that the early, classical Utopias were created, and all this is illustrated most clearly in the life and work of Sir Thomas More, the creator of the first, and, in many respects, the greatest Utopia. He looked upon the hope and despair of his age with an honest, far-seeing eye, and saw that the ruthless destruction of the old society could only be morally justified if it prepared the way for a true commonwealth, which must necessarily be classless and communist, because, as he wrote:

> Where possessions be private, where money beareth all the stroke, it is hard and almost impossible that the commonwealth be justly governed and flourish prosperously. Unless you think thus: that Justice is there

executed where all things come into the hands of evil men, or that prosperity flourisheth where all is divided among a few.

More's communism is, of course, far removed from that of our own time, and in many respects it looks backwards upon an idealised past. Nevertheless he was able, by a remarkable feat of imagination, to see that the best of the past might be combined with the present advance of his time to prepare the way for a new world. Perhaps the fairest estimation of his achievement in this respect comes from that other great utopian William Morris, who wrote in his introduction to the Kelmscott edition of *Utopia*:

> In More are met together the man instinctively sympathetic with the communistic side of medieval society; the protestor against the ugly brutality of the earliest period of commercialism; the enthusiast of the Renaissance, ever looking towards his idealised ancient society as the type and example of all really intelligent human life; the man tinged with the asceticism at once of the philosopher and the monk; an asceticism indeed which he put forward not so much as a duty as a kind of stern adornment of life ...
>
> But lastly we socialists cannot forget that these qualities and excellencies meet to produce a sturdy expression of the longing for a society in which the individual man can scarcely conceive of his existence apart from the commonwealth of which he forms a portion. This, which is the essence of his book, is the essence also of the struggle in which we are engaged. Though doubtless it was the pressure of circumstances in his own days that made More what he was, yet that pressure forced him to give us, not a vision of the new-born capitalistic society, the element in which lived the new learning and the new freedom of his own epoch; but a picture of the real New Birth which many men before him had desired; and which indeed we may well hope is drawing near to realisation, though after such a long series of events which at the time of their happening seemed to nullify his hopes completely.

More had indeed a remarkably clear vision of the 'New Birth', but no answer to the question of how it was to come about. And in fact there was then no visible force capable of effecting such a transformation of society. The bourgeoisie were still too weak and immature to act independently, even supposing that bourgeois society could lead directly to Utopia. Neither More nor any of the humanists dreamed of appealing to the masses, who in any case did not then constitute a revolutionary class. There remained the Prince, the enlightened despot, and nearly all the classical Utopias

are represented as being the work of such a Prince. Yet the humanists were too shrewd not to realise the actual characters and interests of existing Princes. It is this dilemma which gives such force and poignancy to More's dialogue in the first book of his *Utopia* on the desirability of the philosopher taking service under the monarchy: in his book, as in life, More finally decides in favour of this course, but with a clear understanding that what could be accomplished would be little enough. The philosopher must use all his craft 'and that which you cannot turn to good, so to order that it be not very bad'. So he was driven to the unhappy conclusion with which he closes his book:

> So I must needs confess and grant that many things be in the Utopian commonwealth, which in our cities I may rather wish for than hope after.

Faced with this problem it is not surprising that all the early utopians from More to Campanella (*City of the Sun*, 1602), Valentin Andreae (*Christianopolis*, 1619) and Francis Bacon (*The New Atlantis*, 1627) laid their main emphasis on education. They believed in the power of reason and that men in general only needed to be convinced of the correctness of their proposals to put them into practice. This emphasis on education is perhaps not unnatural in any case, given the training and background of the humanists, but it reflects also their lack of understanding (for which we would be foolish to reproach them) of the role of class conflict in the development of society. Since they could not appeal to the exploited it was inevitable that they should appeal to the enlightened. It was still centuries before the idea that the enlightened do not constitute a class could be formulated.

Christianopolis and *The New Atlantis* could not have been written without the example of *Utopia*, and Andreae and Bacon fall very short of More's deep understanding of the essential features of a true commonwealth, but their Utopias have an atmosphere of practicality which reflects the growing strength and confidence of the bourgeoisie by the opening of the seventeenth century. Andreae was a man of affairs and in his native town had, as Professor Helf says in his introduction to *Christianopolis*, 'founded a mutual protective association among the workmen in the cloth-factories and dye-works, and supported it from voluntary subscriptions of his parishioners and friends'. His Utopia has an

almost terrifying likeness to Calvin's Geneva, which he had visited and been impressed by. Of Geneva he wrote:

> Not alone is there in existence an absolutely free commonwealth, but as an object of pride a censorship of morals in accordance with which investigations are made each week into the morals and even into the slightest transgressions of the citizens – first by the supervisors of the wards, then by the aldermen, and finally by the magistrate, as the case demands. As a result, all cursing, gambling, luxury, quarrelling, hatred, conceit, deceit, extravagance and the like, to say nothing of greater sins, are prevented ... With our bitterest tears we must lament that this is lacking and almost entirely neglected by us.[1]

Bacon was much less interested in changes in the structure of society, or in moral questions, than in advances in technique and the extended control by man of his environment through the application of science. The end of our foundation, he wrote:

> is the knowledge of causes and secret motions of things and the enlarging of the bounds of human empire, to the effecting of all things possible.

They both wrote at a time when the bourgeoisie in the Netherlands had already liberated themselves from the feudal Spanish empire, and when in England a revolution was just about to begin. With this revolution Bacon would have had no sort of sympathy, but his work, as well as More's and Andreae's, had a profound effect on the new school of utopian thinkers which that revolution produced – on Samuel Hartlib, on James Harrington, on Samuel Gott, and perhaps, though less certainly, on Gerrard Winstanley.

In the air of revolution, Utopia seemed to be no longer a distant island or an enchanted dream, but a possibility that might take shape in England at a moment's notice. Utopia was seen as the direct and not the dialectical outcome of bourgeois society. With the exception of Winstanley all regard it as the result of a controlled and benevolent capitalism: the classless communism of More has given way to a free-enterprise paradise where property is widely distributed and learning and science encouraged. Hartlib looked confidently to a Parliament composed of gentry and merchants, and it was to the Long Parliament that *A Description of the Famous Kingdom of Macaria* was dedicated in 1641:

> Whereas I am confident, that this honourable court will lay the corner-stone of the world's happiness, before the first recess thereof, I have adventured to cast in my widow's mite into the treasury; not as an instructor or councellor to this honourable assembly, but having delivered my conception in a fiction, as a more mannerly way; having as my pattern Sir Thomas More and Sir Francis Bacon, once Lord Chancellor of England.

Harrington's *Oceana*, while it had its own special features, resembled Macaria in being a constitutional blue-print rather than a Utopia in the traditional sense. In both the element of fiction has been reduced almost to vanishing point.

With Winstanley we enter a new phase. Hartlib at the beginning and Harrington (rather less confidently) at a later stage of the revolution were assured that they were on the most direct road to Utopia. Now that kingly (that is, feudal) power had been ended, no obstacle remained to indefinite improvement. Winstanley, even in 1650, saw the situation differently:

> [The] top bough is lopped off the tree of tyranny; and the kingly power in that one particular is cast out. But alas, oppression is a great tree still and keeps the sun of freedom from the poor commons still; he hath many branches, and great roots which must be grub'd up before everyone can sing Zion's songs in peace.[2]

If the promise of the revolution was to be fulfilled a further effort of a new kind was called for. Winstanley attempted to enact rather than to write his Utopia by calling upon the propertyless to occupy and cultivate the commons and waste lands communally:

> Therefore if the rich will still hold fast to this property of mine and thine, let them labour their own lands with their own hands. And let the common people, that are the gatherings together of Israel from under that bondage, and that say the earth is ours, not mine, let them labour together, and eat bread together upon the commons, mountains and hills.[3]

In this way the curse of covetousness, to which Winstanley attributed man's fall, could be lifted and 'the earth become a common treasury as it was in the beginning'. However naïve the means proposed, this was the first time that Utopia was to be the act of the people rather than of princes or philosophers.

Winstanley's attempt to form a utopian community met with no

greater success than innumerable subsequent attempts, and after its failure he drew up a more formal Utopia in *The Law of Freedom in a Platform* (1651), a Utopia which follows More's social pattern very closely but has politically a more broadly democratic basis.

With the ending of the Commonwealth in 1660 utopian speculation also halted. From the mid-sixteenth century to the early nineteenth there is no important English utopian work with the solitary exception of Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), a utopia of despair of the utmost power and subtlety which it would be useless to attempt to analyse here. In France, on the other hand, throughout the eighteenth century, utopias abound increasingly as we approach the epoch of revolution. Many of them take the form of the imaginary voyage which seems specially characteristic of French utopian literature, but one, Louis Mercier's *L'an deux mille quatre cent quarante* (1770) is noteworthy as being, I think, the first Utopia to be placed in the future rather than in some remote corner of the earth. This is a fashion that will be increasingly followed as the corners grow fewer and less remote and as the idea of social evolution replaces that of special creation.

And now two great and almost simultaneous events took place which seemed for the time to bring Utopia once more down to the earth. The French Revolution was one, the other was the establishment in the USA of a virtually pure bourgeois republic unhampered by feudal survivals such as no European revolution could entirely eliminate. Both events caused the most extravagant expectations. If the hopes and speculations of this time can be summed up in a single word, that word is *Reason*. To the bar of Reason everything was brought, kingship, religion, laws, customs and beliefs: whatever could not account rationally for itself was unhesitatingly condemned. In Reason was the key to Utopia, for if only the ideal society could be discovered and clearly demonstrated to be reasonable, no-one could seriously oppose it. 'Truth,' wrote Blake, 'can never be told so as to be understood and not be believed.' A standpoint that 150 years ago had been peculiar to a few advanced individuals like Hartlib now became universal dogma. That Reason itself had to be examined, that while, for example, it seemed reasonable to the capitalist that all men should be free to exploit and be exploited, this was by no means so self evident to the worker, was something still to be

understood. It has taken us another 150 years to learn that Reason itself has a class basis.

At this point all that seemed necessary was to sweep away certain negative restraints – monarchy, priestcraft, ignorance – by which men were coerced or deluded into denying Reason. Once this was done the rest would follow easily. The doctrine of human perfectibility might be absurd enough in some of the forms it took, yet it contained in itself the fundamental truth that human nature is itself the product of human life and the actual conditions under which that life is lived. An unending prospect opened out, and here, I think, is the new feature which marked the utopian speculation of this age. Earlier utopians had conceived a perfect commonwealth finished in all its parts and therefore eternally fixed. Now, progress was not merely the road to Utopia, it existed within Utopia, which, instead of having merely a geography, now has also a history.

The very extravagance of these hopes led to their swift and total disappointment. As Engels wrote in his *Anti-Dühring*:

> In a word, compared with the glowing promises of the Enlightenment, the social and political institutions established by the 'victory of reason' proved to be bitterly disappointing caricatures. The only thing lacking was people to voice this disillusionment, and these came with the turn of the century.

We can trace the whole process of hope and disillusion typically expressed in the work of the great utopian poet William Blake; in the contrast between the unbounded expectations inspiring such early poems as *Europe, America* and *The French Revolution* and the sombre tone of the later *Milton* and *Jerusalem*, with their perspectives of struggle immensely complex and prolonged. More systematically, the utopian socialists, St Simon, Fourier and Owen, outlined the tasks necessary to complete a revolution they felt had halted halfway. It had removed some of the obstacles standing in the way of change: as a bourgeois revolution it had not even begun to set itself the task of ending the basic evil of society – the exploitation of man by man. The positive achievement of the utopian socialists lay in setting this objective before humanity and in analysing the defects of existing society; their weakness lay in their inability to see that further change could only be accomplished by the exploited themselves.

Nevertheless the idea of socialism was abroad, and as it spread among the masses it became transformed, ceasing to be utopian, beginning to be scientific. The turning point here, as in so many other respects, came with the year of revolutions in 1848.

It is impossible to go very far with the writing of a history of utopianism without realising that what one is really writing about is the history of a special aspect of the bourgeois revolution. The rise and decline of Utopia cannot be separated from the rise and decline of the bourgeoisie as a progressive class, since at every stage it reflects the hopes, beliefs and fears of the most enlightened members of that class. And it is by the middle of the nineteenth century that the decisive change is apparent. The main tasks of the bourgeoisie in the most advanced countries were accomplished, already the proletariat was appearing as its successor, including in its tasks those which the bourgeoisie had proved incapable of carrying to completion. The Chartist movement in Britain, the part played by the workers in the European revolutions in 1848, were the clear signs of this change, while with the publication of *The Communist Manifesto* the mission of the classic utopians was ended.

In 1877 Marx wrote to Sorge:

> Utopian socialism, playing with fancy pictures of the future structure of society, is now raging in a much more futile form, as compared not only with the great French and English utopians but with Weitling. Naturally utopianism, which *before* the time of materialistic-critical socialism concealed the germs of the latter within itself, coming now *after* the event, can only be silly – silly, stale and basically reactionary.[4]

Utopianism may be compared to a bridge, which, when one is on the far side of a river, is a means of crossing it, but which, when once crossed, leads only *backwards*. Marx, of course, is referring here particularly to Germany, but it is interesting that his letter was addressed to Sorge in the United States, for it was there that utopianism in its new form was to flourish most abundantly in the two succeeding decades. This was perhaps natural, since the USA was the purest form of bourgeois society that had yet been known. Seen from across the Atlantic at the beginning of the nineteenth century, with the part played by slavery and indentured labour diminished by distance, this revolutionary democracy could easily be idealised. It was here that Southey and Coleridge planned to

plant their Pantisocracy on the banks of the Susquehanna, while Blake saw it less as a geographical entity than as a symbol of the coming liberation of humanity. A whole host of utopian communities, Owenite, Fourierist, Icarian, Warrenite and the rest were drawn irresistibly thither as the place where their dreams could be realised. Similarly many of the literary Utopias of the age – Spensonia (1793), Lithconia (1802) and New Britain (1820) – appear to be little more than the logical developments of the free life of the American frontier, a life in which the freedom persisted after the hardships and barbarisms had been overcome. A steady stream of emigrants poured across the Atlantic in search of freedom and prosperity.

The belief that bourgeois society, given a clean start, could *become* Utopia was of brief duration. One by one of the utopian communities foundered; the development of capitalism, all the swifter for the absence of pre-capitalist restraints, produced the same kind of corruption and exploitation as in the Old World, often in an aggravated form. When Dickens visited the USA in 1842 his illusions were quickly shattered, and Lytton, writing his utopian fantasy *The Coming Race*, makes his hero speak with an almost Swiftean irony about the home of freedom:

> I touched but slightly, though indulgently, on the antiquated and decaying institutions of Europe, in order to expatiate on the present grandeur and prospective pre-eminence of that glorious American Republic, in which Europe enviously seeks its model and tremblingly foresees its doom ... Fortunately recollecting the peroration of a speech on the purifying influences of American democracy, made by a certain eloquent senator (for whose vote in the Senate a Railway Company, to which my two brothers belonged, had just paid 20,000 dollars), I wound up by repeating its glowing predictions of the magnificent future that smiled upon mankind – when the flag of freedom should float over an entire continent, and two hundred millions of intelligent citizens, accustomed from infancy to the daily use of revolvers, should apply to a cowering universe the doctrine of the Patriot Monroe.

It was in this atmosphere of the exploded dream of a free petty-bourgeois society that the extraordinary outburst of utopian writing, of which Edward Bellamy is today the only remembered figure, took place: it is perhaps not often realised to what extent he was part of a school. The utopias of John Macnie (*The Diotheras*, 1883), Chancey Thomas (*The Crystal Button*, 1891) or Albert

Chavannes (*The Future Commonwealth*, 1892) may be of slight value in themselves but they serve to remind us that the popularity of *Looking Backwards* was due less to any intrinsic merit than to the accuracy with which it reflected the fears of the American middle class, caught between growing monopoly and an increasingly militant working class. All these utopias are, to a greater or less extent, socialist, but their socialism bears a family likeness to the old German 'true socialism' of which Auguste Cornu wrote:

> In fact, Marx said, this socialism did not reflect the progress of the proletariat but the state of mind of the German petty bourgeoisie, impotent but yearning, fearing alike the development of large-scale capital, and consoling itself with an emasculated humanism in which it found its own image idealised.[5]

Or, as Morris put it in his criticism of *Looking Backward*:

> [Bellamy's] temperament may be called the unmixed modern one, unhistorical and unartistic, and it makes its owner (if a socialist) perfectly satisfied with modern civilisation, if only the injustices, miseries and waste of class society could be got rid of; which half change seems possible to him. The only ideal of life which such a man can see is that of the industrious *professional* middle-class man of today, purified from the crime of their complicity with the monopolist class, and become independent instead of being as they are now, parasitical.[6]

Morris' critique in the *Commonweal* was followed by a more positive rejoinder. *News from Nowhere*, though there are clear indications that he was only giving final shape to something that had long been maturing in his mind, was also written to give what he felt to be a genuinely socialist forecast of the future in response to Bellamy's misleading one. It is by any standards the most important modern Utopia, and precisely because it is not, in the ordinary sense, utopian at all. Morris was not merely concerned to draw a delightful and moving picture of a communist England, though he does this with extraordinary success. He first shows how the classless society of the future might grow out of the class conflicts of the present, in this as in many other respects standing out in strong contrast to Bellamy, who envisaged socialism as growing directly out of the triumph of monopoly capitalism:

> The nation organised as one great business corporation in which all other corporations were absorbed; it became the one capitalist in place of all the other capitalists, the sole employer, the final monopoly in which all previous and lesser monopolies were swallowed up, a monopoly in the profits and economies of which all citizens shared ... The change had been long foreseen. Public opinion had become fully ripe for it, and the whole mass of the people was behind it. There was no more possibility of opposing it by force than by argument.

Deeply Marxist in his approach, if not always in matters of detail, Morris was remarkably free from that dogmatism which has been the darling sin of most utopians. What interested him was not the mechanical and institutional innovations which so delighted Bellamy but the historical movement from present to future and the quality of human living which may properly be expected in a classless society.

News from Nowhere is one of the really great socialist classics, and as such has had a wide influence, though as yet less wide than it has deserved, but it has had few successors and none which in any sense approach it. Such post-Morris socialist utopias as Anatole France's *The White Stone* (1905) or Robert Blatchford's *The Sorcery Shop* (1907) owe what merit they possess to the ideas of Morris which they do little more than present in a diluted and weakened form. More vital than either of these was Jack London's *The Iron Heel* (1907). He, even more than Morris, was primarily concerned with the problem of the transition from capitalism to socialism, and he presents a horrifying forecast of the development of monopoly capitalism in the direction of what we now call fascism. His weakness, which may be the result of having absorbed Marxism in the vulgarised De Leonite form which prevailed in the USA of his time, lies in his inability to grasp the character and role either of a revolutionary party or a revolutionary class.

The utopias of Bellamy and his school were without exception flat, philistine and provincial. Yet even in their emasculated humanism they did stand for certain civilised values, and above all for a confidence in the essential decency of mankind and the possibility of human happiness. The same may be said of the many utopian writings of H.G. Wells, from *A Modern Utopia* (1905) to *Men Like Gods* (1922). Wells, who may be regarded as the last and most powerful representative of the school of Bellamy, stands at the very end of the long tradition of bourgeois humanism, when

it had ceased to be a revolutionary creed reshaping the world and had degenerated into a complacent orthodoxy. After a lifetime spent in prescribing confident if sometimes contradictory nostrums, Wells seems in his last years to have realised the futility of them all: the tragedy was that he had nothing with which to replace them.

> Man must go steeply up or down, and the odds seem to be all in favour of his going down and out. If he comes up, so great is the adaptation demanded of him that he must cease to be a man. Ordinary man is at the end of his tether.

So he wrote in *Mind at the End of Its Tether* (1945).

After Bellamy and Wells utopianism had still a long way to fall as the bourgeoisie lost the last shreds of confidence in its mission as a progressive class. The classical utopias could all be plausibly regarded as in some sense the outcome of bourgeois society. Modern utopian writings only express the fears of a class without a future.

This decline has two stages, which, naturally, overlap somewhat in time. In the first, the future feared is that of a machine world, which is essentially the world of capitalism freed from its contradictions and then carried to its logical conclusions. In this world man is swallowed up in the machine. The most famous example is perhaps Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, but the beginning of the fear may be traced quite early in such books as Percy Greg's *Across the Zodiac* (1880) or Ignatius Donnelly's *Caesar's Column* (1890). In both of these we find the significant complication that the unbridled growth of capitalism produced the ultimate disaster of a socialist revolution that threatens to destroy all civilisation. Yet in these books, and in a somewhat different and more deeply humanist way in E.M. Forster's *The Machine Stops*, it is still a super-capitalism run riot which is the immediate enemy.

Since 1917, and still more since 1945, with their proof that socialism is not a dream but a workable reality, a further retreat may be observed. The fear is not now of a catastrophic failure of socialism leading to chaos, but of its success, and the typical utopia, or rather anti-utopia, is now the nightmare of a classless society. Indeed, Utopia today is either a classless society or it is nothing. It is this which is so terrifying, as Nicholas Berdiaeff

revealed in a passage which Huxley quoted as a preface to *Brave New World*:

> Utopias seem very much more realisable than we had formerly supposed. And now we find ourselves faced with a question which is painful in quite a new way: How can we avoid their actual realisation?

A painful question indeed, and one which is likely to demand more talent than our modern anti-utopians seem to possess. The method adopted in such books as Eugene Zamiatin's *We* (1924) or the later *Ape and Essence* of Aldous Huxley (1948) or George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) is to induce an irrational fear in the mind of the reader (reflecting, no doubt, the fear in their own minds) that any major social change must lead to a world of corruption, misery and tyranny. Let us be content for ever with exploitation and injustice lest worse befall, is their argument. In such 'utopias' as these we see the final stage in the degeneration of utopianism, when, no longer content to create imaginary worlds in the abstract, it turns to slandering the actual transformation of the world which is now going on, a transformation which is making its traditional task for ever unnecessary.

Clearly the classical utopia has run its course and cannot be renewed, while a class without a future cannot be expected to create positive utopias. What of those who are actively engaged in building socialism, or are fighting to achieve it? It seems likely that much of the thought and energy which once went into the fabrication of paper utopias will go into more practical and more satisfying tasks. Nor does the conception of society as a process of evolution lend itself readily to the concoction of formal blue-prints of the future: we can no longer think of Utopia as a completed project in the way the classical utopians were able to do. Nevertheless the problems of the future are perennially fascinating, for socialists perhaps even more so than for anyone else, and I think we may well see socialist utopias which trace lines of possible development, which suggest stages which may be reached and the way we may pass from one stage to another, and perhaps most of all, which attempt to imagine how man will change in a changing world. The greatest subject for utopian speculation may well remain what it has always been, the development of man himself rather than of institutions or things.

Notes

1. Cited in M.L. Berneri, *Journey Through Utopia*, London 1950, p.105.
2. *Gerrard Winstanley, Selections from his Works* (L. Hamilton ed.), 1944, p.83.
3. Ibid., p. .
4. Karl Marx and Frederich Engels, *Selected Correspondence*, London 1956, p. 376.
5. *Science and Society*, Vol. XII No. 1, p.112.
6. *Commonweal*, 22 June 1889.

The Leveller Style

Many of us, when we think of the pamphlet literature of the English Revolution, think first, and often think only, of the work of John Milton. This is natural, since Milton's place not only as a poet but as a master of polemical prose has long been established. Nevertheless it can lead us to a false estimate of the vast and rich pamphlet literature of the age, for Milton was as far from being unique as he was from being typical, and, if his work is a peak, it is a peak only of one range among several. It may also be said to be somewhat outside the main current of English prose. Milton was a classical scholar, as much at home in Latin as in English, and even his English prose reads most often like the magnificent translation of a magnificent original. In so far as he is typical, he is typical of the learned writers who wrote for a limited audience similarly endowed, and whose work is heavy larded with Latin, Greek and even Hebrew, and weighted down with allusions and quotations from all the literatures of Europe.

But meanwhile a new reading public and a new kind of writer was arising, men with little or no knowledge of any language but their own. In the twenty years between 1640 and 1660 these men came to the front, and thousands of their books, pamphlets and news-sheets poured off the press. The *Catalogue of Thomason Tracts*, the great collection in the British Museum, which is yet very far from being complete, lists nearly 15,000 pamphlets from these years, of which certainly the majority are by writers of this vernacular type. Of all the popular pamphlets, those written on behalf of the Levellers are among the most brilliant as well as the most important.

The Levellers were the party of the most advanced revolutionary sections of the lower-middle class, the independent peasantry, the smaller tradesmen and artisans and perhaps the

journeymen of the bigger cities. They drew support above all from the masses of London, then at least ten times the size of any other town in England, and from the army, Cromwell's New Model, the plain men who knew what they fought for and loved what they knew.[1] After the defeat of the royalists in the Civil War the Levellers demanded a radical transformation of the political and social structure, and, in *The Agreement of the People*[2] put forward the first comprehensive programme of bourgeois democracy, including manhood suffrage, annual parliaments, full guarantees of civil and religious liberty, abolition of all feudal privileges and the reform and simplification of the legal code. Such a programme was not realisable in the existing conditions and the Levellers were defeated, and, after the middle of 1649, declined rapidly in influence.

For several years, however, they had been at the centre of the revolutionary struggle, and one of the most important achievements of progressive historians in Britain and the USA during the past few decades has been a re-estimation of their role and importance and the reprinting of many of the host of superb pamphlets which they produced in the course of their campaigns.[3] It so happened that three at least of the outstanding Leveller figures – John Lilburne, Richard Overton and William Walwyn[4] – were also pamphleteers of the first order, each with a highly individual and strongly contrasting style of work. A hostile writer refers to one of their productions: *A Manifestation from Lieutenant Col. John Lilburn, Mr. William Walwyn, Mr. Thomas Prince, and Mr. Richard Overton, (Now Prisoners in the Tower of London) And others, commonly (though unjustly) styled Levellers*:

> whose devout, spacious, meek, self-denying, soft and pleasant lips favours much of the sligh, cunning and close subtlety of ... Mr William Walwyn, who (as the Serpent that deceived our first Parents was more subtle than any beast of the field which the Lord God made) is much more crafty than the rest of his brethren, of whose curious spinning we have several reasons to presume this piece, for here is not the licentious provoking daringness of L. Col. Lilburn's pen, nor yet the notorious profaneness of Mr. Richard Overtons pen.[5]

Allowing for the obvious prejudice here displayed, this is a reasonably just and accurate comparison: from the point of view of an opponent these were their distinguishing features. What they

did share, apart from their common social and political outlook, was their vernacular humanism. All three were educated, widely-read men who had not been through the traditional classical discipline of the universities, but had been apprenticed to trades in their middle teens and had henceforth completed their education in accordance with their own interests and needs. This, undoubtedly, was one of the main reasons for their closeness to and immediate influence over their audience, most of whom had a background closely similar.

Of the three Lilburne was as much the most significant as a political personality as he was the least gifted as a writer. 'Martyr, folk-hero and demagogue' as Professor Haller calls him,[6] he dramatised his struggles and wrongs in a flood of words that poured from him without respite and often, it would seem, almost without reflection. His enemies were fond of describing him as a

> man of a turbulent spirit, always opposing, striving, and flying in the faces of all authorities, restless, and never satisfied whoever is uppermost ... and that therefore it is very requisite that I be taken off, and that otherwise England must never look to rest long in peace; yea, so turbulent, that if there were none in the world but John Lilburne, rather than want one to strive withall, forsooth, John would certainly quarrel with Lilburne.[7]

In all this there was some truth, but Lilburne was turbulent because he felt himself, as indeed he actually became, a symbolic figure. A pamphlet written in defence of his friend William Larner is entitled *Everymans Case*: Lilburne felt everyman's case to be his own and his own everyman's: he was the representative of the whole body of the oppressed people demanding justice and the restoration of their stolen birthright.

It is this which gave his writing its force and dignity, and at his best he could write with an unstrained simplicity, as when he subscribes himself, with neither boastfulness nor false modesty as:

> JOHN LILBURNE, that never yet changed his principles from better to worse, nor could never be threatened out of them, nor courted from them, that never feared the rich nor mighty, nor never despised the poor nor needy, but alwaies hath, and hopes by Gods goodness to continue, *semper idem*.[8]

At times he uses homely, familiar ideas and images to drive home his point, and a rhetoric which moves because it springs from the heart:

> But as the Water-men at *Queen-hive* doe usually cry, 'Westward hough, hough,' so according to the present current of the times, most honest men have more than cause to cry in the Water-mens language, 'AEgypt hough, hough, the house of Bondage, slavery, oppression, taxation, heavy and cruell, wee can no longer beare it, wee are as much provoked and forced to cast off all our yokes and crosses from our shoulders (except only that of Persecution) as ever any people or Nation, though no People or Nation under heaven have been more free, beneficiall and helpfull to those whom we intrusted to help and deliver us from Oppression, which saith the *Wise-man*, is enough to make wise men mad.'[9]

Finally, in writing of his own experiences, or of current political happenings, he can maintain a clear narrative style which puts the course of events plainly before his readers. It was partly for these qualities, but above all for the sense of leadership and authority that runs through them, that his pamphlets were eagerly bought and read by the soldiers in the army and the common citizens of London, circulating in thousands, and sometimes in tens of thousands of copies.

Unfortunately, much of his writing falls woefully below these levels. There is a great deal of legalistic argument, overloaded with quotations and references to legal and theological authorities as well as to the Scriptures. In these passages the style becomes angry and involved: often a single sentence will run on for pages, till its beginning has been lost before the end is in sight. Yet, whether he is writing badly or well, it is always an unmistakable man who writes. Lilburne's style has always, like his character, something of the grandeur as well as a little of the absurdity of a national monument.

If Lilburne was the born leader, the Tribune of the People, Richard Overton was the dedicated freelance, the exuberant individualist who finds both freedom and happiness in surrender to a great cause. Like most of the Leveller leaders he began his public career as a defender of religious liberty who progressed thence by inevitable stages to political radicalism. Among his earlier works was the brilliant tolerationist polemic, *The Arraignment of Mr Persecution*, from which there is good reason to think Bunyan may have borrowed something for the trial scene of *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

Overton's style could be almost as verbose as Lilburne's, but in an entirely different way and for quite other reasons. Where

Lilburne's writing staggers under its own weight, Overton's rushes and soars, towering fantastically at one moment, falling into the ruins the next. It has a quality of delighted swashbuckling which leads him always from defence to attack, rejoicing to find a gap in the opposing line of battle through which he can plunge. Something of this aggressive quality shows itself in the titles which Overton gave his pamphlets: *A Defiance Against All Arbitrary Usurpations, An Arrow Against All Tyrants and Tyranny, shot into the Prerogative Bowels of the House of Lords. The Hunting of the Foxes ... by five small Beagles (late of the Armie)*,[10] and *The Baiting of the Great Bull of Bashan*.[11]

When Overton was arrested in 1649 there was taken up with him a certain soldier of the house who was found in bed with his (the soldier's) wife and who was told that 'he must get a Certificate from his Captain that he was married to her'. This was enough to set Overton away in his happiest vein:

> Friends and Country-men where are you now? What shall you do that have no Captains to give you Certificates? sure you must have the banes of Matrimony re-asked at the Conventicle of Gallants at White-hall, or at least you must thence have a Congregationall Licence, (without offence be it spoken to true Churches) to lie with your wives, else how shall your wives be chast or the children Legitimate? they have now taken Cognizance over your wives and beds, whether will they next? Judgement is now come into the hands of the armed-fury Saints. My Masters have a care what you do, or how you look upon your wives, for the new-Saints Millitant are paramount to all Laws, King, Parliament, husbands, wives, beds &c.[12]

Much more is involved here than high spirits. With the Levellers, revolutionary politics were, for the first time, bursting through the religious forms in which they had hitherto been veiled. The Calvinists had stood for the concentration of power in the hands of the godly minority, the elect, which, in practice, meant the prosperous bourgeoisie. The Levellers stood for the rights of man, for the conception of politics as a continuous activity of the whole nation. 'The poorest he that is in England hath a life to live, as the greatest he,' declared the Leveller Colonel Rainborough,[13] and by the same token, the greatest sinner as the greatest saint. This meant that politics must be secularised, and it was because he stood most conspicuously and outspokenly for this that his enemies found in Overton's pen the 'notorious profanness' of

which they complained. To them he replied in a passage that shows that pen at its best:

> As I am in myself in respect to my own personall sins and transgressions; so I am to myself and to God and so I must give an account; the just must stand by his own faith; But as I am in relation to the Commonwealth, that all men have cognizance of, because it concerns their own particular lives ... So that the businesse is, not how great a sinner I am, but how faithfull and reall to the Common-wealth; that's the matter concerneth my neighbour, and whereof my neighbour is only in this publick Controversie to take notice; and for my personal sins that are not of Civil cognizance or wrong unto him, to leave them to God, whose judgment is righteous and just.[14]

And in his last known pamphlet, written from prison in July 1649, he turns the tables completely upon his critics and puts into the most popular language that humanist rejection of the dogma of original sin without which no democratic political philosophy is really possible:

> Mirth to you is like a Shoulder of Mutton to a sick Horse.... And now (my tender friends) I pray tell me what spirit is this? 'tis a *foul spirit*, away with it for shame; go purge, goe purge; one penniworth of the *Agreement of the people* with a good resolution taken morning and evening will work out this corruption....
>
> *Mirth* sure is of *Divine Instinct*, and, I think I may boldly say more naturall than Melancholy, and lesse savours of the Curse. Nature in its Creation was pure and good, void of corruption or anything obnoxious or destructive: all misery and mischief came in with the fall ... in which number you may reckon Melancholy ... and 'tis the root of the root of all wickedness, *Coventousnesse*, for when have you seen a Melancholy man that's not covetous? and a covetous man seldom proves a good Common-wealths man; yet this ill *Weed* is gotten into so religious esteem that all our *Religion* is turned into Melancholy.[15]

It is not surprising that Overton (who was also suspect of atheism) was hated by the 'new-Saints Millitant'. What does seem strange at first sight is that his comrade William Walwyn was even more hated and more unscrupulously maligned. While Lilburne was the popular leader and Overton the outrageous pamphleteer, Walwyn seems to have combined the roles of organiser and philosopher. He avoided notice as far as possible, was an able committee-man, an adept at the drafting and promotion of petitions and manifestos, while almost all his numerous pamphlets

appeared anonymously, though the authorship of many of them must have been widely known. Their titles are just as characteristic as those chosen by Overton, and illustrate very clearly the difference of method between the two men – *The Power of Love, The Compassionate Samaritane, A Still and Soft Voice from the Scriptures, Walwyns Just Defence* – what could appear less aggressive or more disarming? Yet these and similar works aroused in Presbyterians and Independents alike a frenzy of rage both on account of their political and theological implications and because the smooth texture of their argument afforded so little with which an opponent could come to grips.

Like Lilburne and Overton, Walwyn became a wholehearted advocate of religious toleration. But his demand for toleration did not, like that of most tolerationists of his time, spring from a desire that his own sect should be tolerated, but from a detachment then rare. Often one can sense him passing tacitly from the position that all forms of religion are good to the position that none are *very* good after all. Thus he can write:

> I blush not to say, I have long been accustomed to read Montaigns *Essaies*.... And in his twentieth Chapter, page: 102, he saies, speaking of the Cannibals, the very words that import lying, falshood, treason, dissimulation, covetousness, envy, detraction, and pardon, were never heard of amongst them.
>
> These, and the like flowers, I think it lawfull to gather out of his Wildernesse, and to give them room in my Garden; yet this worthy Montaign was but a Romish Catholique: yet to observe with what contentment and full swoln joy he recites these cogitations, is wonderfull to consideration: And now what shall I say? Go to this honest Papist, or to these innocent Cannibals, ye Independent Churches, to learn civility, humanity, simplicity of heart; yea, charity and Christianity.[16]

He seems to have belonged to no sect, and if he had any marked leaning it was towards such quietist, non-institutional groups as the Familists or Seekers, though he denies belonging to neither of these.[17] In *The Power of Love* he argues not merely that all men may be saved if they will, but, from the Calvinist standpoint, much more dangerously, that none will be damned, a doctrine with the most explosive political implications.

His practice appears to have been to go from church to church with his friends, hearing and afterwards criticising the sermons. This in itself would be regarded by the ministers as a scandalous

presumption on the part of a layman without a classical, university training. Walwyn's offence became greater when he elaborated a theoretical justification, advising the common man to trust to his own reason:

> He that bade us try all things, and hold fast that which was good, did suppose that men have faculties and abilities wherewithall to try all things, or else the counsell had been given in vaine. And therefore however the Minister may by reason of his continuall exercise in preaching, and discoursing, by his skill in Arts and Languages, by the conceit of the esteeme he hath with a great part of admiring people ... presume it easie to possesse us, that they are more divine than other men (as they style themselves) yet if the people would but take boldness to themselves and not distrust their owne understandings, they would soon find that use and experience is the only difference, and that all necessary knowledge is easie to be had, and by themselves acquirable.[18]

He indulged freely in argument, and would infuriate the orthodox by such a question as 'How can you prove the Scriptures to be the Word of God?'[19] In politics his method was the same: every position was subjected to the test of reason and utility, every argument built upon first principles:

> I carry with me in all places a Touch-stone that tryeth all things, and labours to hold nothing but what upon plain grounds appeareth good and useful: I abandon all nicities and uselesse things: my manner is in all disputes, reasonings and discourses, to enquire what is the use: and if I find it not very materiall, I abandon it, there are plain usefull doctrines sufficient to give peace to my mind, direction and comfort to my life: and to draw all men to a consideration of things evidently usefull, hath been a special cause that I have applied my selfe in a friendly manner unto all.[20]

Where Lilburne was accustomed to make his appeal to the supposed ancient laws of England, to Magna Carta and the legendary Saxon past, and Overton to a sturdy common sense, Walwyn would build upon what he regarded as the universal laws of nature. And he made his appeal in a personal, almost confidential tone, and in a smooth, easy-running and civilised prose which stands almost alone in the seventeenth century. Many things about him are, and probably always will be, uncertain, since the fullest picture we have of him is drawn by his enemies, and many of their accusations against him, such as being an advocate

of Communism, can neither be proved nor refuted. Walwyn replied to his attackers in a passage which shows that the art of the witch hunt, with all the refinements of the smear and the principle of guilt by association, has made but little advance since the seventeenth century:

> If you observe any man to be of a publique and active spirit, (though he be no Independent or Separatist) he can never be friend to you in your work, and therefore you are to give him out, to be strongly suspected of whoredom, or drunkennesse, prophanenesse, an irreligious person ... or say he is suspected to hold intelligence with Oxford,[21] or anything no matter what, somewhat will be believed....
>
> If you see any such man but once talking with a Papist ... you may give out that very honest men suspect him to be a Jesuit: if any one but demand of you or any other, how you can know the Scriptures to be the word of God, give it out for certain that he denieth them, or if any put questions concerning *God* or *Christ*, or the *Trinity*, you have more than enough to lay accusations upon them, that shall stick by them as long as they live.[22]

What we can at least say is that enough of Walwyn's own work remains to enable us to recognise a writer and thinker of exceptional boldness and originality, and a mind extraordinarily mature and civilised.

Further, and this is true of the Levellers as a whole and especially of the three I have been considering, they were civilised in a new way. Whatever their limitations, they had reached a conception of man and his place in society, of the role of persuasion and the power of the written and spoken word, that was more accurate, more nearly a reflective of objective reality, than any other group of their time in any country. They wrote effectively not merely because they were exceptionally gifted or technically well equipped, though this can fairly be claimed at least for Overton and Walwyn, but because they wrote with a purpose clearly understood and deeply felt, and for an audience which they knew to be close and immediately responsive. These badly printed pamphlets, often printed illegally on little back-street presses, strike home today as they did three hundred years ago because they are warm, generous and candid, because their authors knew exactly what they wanted to say and went to their work without hesitation or doubt or any pretension to the grand style. They stand near the head of one of the great streams of English prose, the stream which later was to include such mighty figures as

Bunyan, Defoe, Paine, Cobbett and Shaw. They can fairly claim to be the fathers of the tradition of plain English writing dedicated to the service of the plain man.

Notes

1. Thomas Carlyle (ed). *Letters and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell* (S.C. Lomas ed.), London 1904, Vol.1, p. 154.
2. Four documents differing in important respects, were issued under this name. Two are reprinted in S.R. Gardiner, *Constitutional Documents of the Puritan Revolution 1625–1660*, Oxford 1906. All four are in Don M. Wolfe (ed.), *Leveller Manifestoes: the Puritan Revolution*, New York 1944.
3. The pamphlets of the Levellers are extremely rare and only survive in a few copies, sometimes a single copy, in great libraries. They were therefore virtually inaccessible till comparatively recently. In 1933 W. Haller published a number in *Tracts on Liberty in the Puritan Revolution 1638–1647*, 3 vols., Columbia University Press. More material was printed in A.S.P. Woodhouse's *Puritanism and Liberty*, Dent, London 1938. In 1944 there appeared *The Leveller Tracts 1647–1653*, edited by W. Haller and Godfrey Davies, Columbia University Press, and *Leveller Manifestoes*, edited by Don M. Wolfe, Nelson, New York. These volumes taken together provide an adequate selection from the works of the most important Leveller pamphleteers.
4. Other Leveller writers, whom it is not possible to discuss here, include John Wildman, Thomas Prince and Samuel Chidley.
5. *Walwins Wiles*, p. 2.
6. W. Haller, *Liberty and Reformation in the Puritan Revolution*, New York 1955, p. 262.
7. Lilburne, *The Just Defence of John Lilburne*, London 1653, pp. 1–2.
8. Lilburne and others, *The Picture of the Council of State*, London 1649, p. 23.
9. Lilburne, *England's Birth-Right Justified Against All Arbitrary Usurpation*, London 1645, pp. 43-4.
10. The Foxes and Cromwell, Ireton, etc. The Beagles, five troopers who had been cashiered from the army for opposing them.
11. Satirists at this time were fond of alluding to Cromwell as a bull. For example *A Hue and Cry after Cromwell*, published only a week later than Overton's pamphlet, says: 'He was brought up in the *Isle of Ely*, where for his agility of body he was called *the Townbull*; which made his Parents keep him for a *Breeder*, and not accustome him to the Yoake.'
12. *The Picture of the Council of State*, p. 31.
13. Woodhouse, op. cit., p. 53.
14. *The Picture of the Council of State*, p. 44.
15. *The Baiting of the Great Bull of Bashan*, London 1649, pp. 3–4.
16. *Walwyns Just Defence*, pp. 10–11.
17. Thomas Edwards, *The Second Part of Gangraena*, p. 25. Walwyn: *A Whisper in the Eare of Mr Thomas Edwards*, pp. 6–7.

18. *The Compassionate Samaritane*, pp. 25–6.
19. *Walwins Wiles*, p. 5.
20. *A Whisper*, p. 6.
21. Oxford was at this time the headquarters of the Royalists.
22. Walwyn, *An Antidote to Master Edwards His Old and New Poyson*, pp. 8–9.

The Everlasting Gospel

A Study in the Sources of William Blake

I The Poet and his World

Blake was born on 28 November 1757, in Broad Street, Soho, in the heart of the squalid, compact London of the mid-eighteenth century. It was a filthy, disease-ridden city with the most violent contrasts of riches and poverty, yet still small enough for escape on foot to be possible even for a small child. Blake's early, and, indeed, much of his later poetry is the poetry of a city child who knew and loved the surrounding country. Thus he writes:

> I wander thro' each charter'd street,
> Near where the charter'd Thames does flow,
> And mark in every face I meet
> Marks of weakness, marks of woe. (75)*

but also:

> The fields from Islington to Marybone,
> To Primrose Hill and Saint John's wood,
> Were builded over with pillars of gold,
> And there Jerusalem's pillars stood ...
>
> The Jew's-harp-house and the Green man,
> The Ponds where Boys to bathe delight,
> The fields of Cows by Willan's farm,
> Shine in Jerusalem's pleasant sight. (463-4)

His whole life, with only one important exception, was passed in London, and he was never at ease away from it. Even the air of Hampstead, as he explains in one of his letters, 'always did, so I fear it always will' produce an acute bodily illness. (919)

Two facts about his background have an importance that cannot possibly be overstressed. First, he was born into the world of London dissenting radicalism. His father, James Blake, was a hosier, a small shopkeeper who most probably made many of the goods he sold. There is little evidence for the tradition that he was a follower of Swedenborg: he may have been, but the first formal organisation of a Swedenborgian congregation in London did not take place till 1788 – four years after James Blake's death. What is known is that William Blake and his wife were both foundation members of this congregation, though they did not long remain in it. James Blake was, however, certainly a dissenter, though of what persuasion is unknown. We really know very little of him except that he was wise enough to see that there was something in his son beyond his understanding, and that, instead of hating and repressing what he saw, he helped him to follow his own course. Blake was spared a formal education, and, instead of being forced into the family business, was apprenticed, at his own request, to an engraver.

This brings us to the second fundamental fact, that he alone of all the great English poets was, and remained all his life, a manual worker, one of the highly skilled craftsmen who formed a substantial part of the population of London in his time. Later in life he painted pictures, and engraved his own designs, as well as his poems, few of which were ever published in any other form during his lifetime, yet all the while he remained a working engraver, ready to accept and execute commissions from whatever source. At no time did all these activities bring him more than a bare living. It was from the craftsman's special standpoint that Blake regarded the rapid development of industrial capitalism in England:

> And all the Arts of Life they chang'd into the Arts of Death in Albion.
> The hour-glass contemn'd because its simple workmanship
> Was like the workmanship of the plowman, and the water wheel
> That raises water into cisterns, broken and burn'd with fire
> Because its workmanship was like the workmanship of the shepherd;
> And in their stead, intricate wheels invented, wheel without wheel,
> To perplex youth in their outgoings and to bind to labours in Albion
> Of day and night the myriads of eternity: that they may grind
> And polish brass and iron hour after hour, laborious task,
> Kept ignorant of its use: that they may spend the days of wisdom
> In sorrowful drudgery to obtain a scanty pittance of bread,
> In ignorance to view a small portion and think that All,

> And call it Demonstration, blind to all the simple rules of life. (517)

A machine does not in itself grow more evil by growing more complex, but the producer can still own a simple, uncostly machine. He cannot own a complex, expensive one. And Blake saw the growth of capitalism turning the whole man into a divided man, a *hand*. This theme of the division of man and his struggle to reintegrate himself lies at the heart of all his symbolism. He came to it with the simple, angry vision of a man who is poor and works with his hands, and his bitterest hatred was reserved for those who created and defended what he knew to be an unnecessary and man-made poverty.

A certain Bishop Watson wrote a book attacking Tom Paine, in the margin of which Blake wrote furious comments. One of the Bishop's other works, of which a list is given, was *The Wisdom and Goodness of God, in having made both Rich and Poor*. Blake wrote against this:

> God made Man happy and Rich, but the Subtil made the Ignorant Poor. This must be a most wicked and blasphemous book. (751)

Such a comment helps us to find in Blake's poetry an actuality which that of his great contemporaries lacked. In the so-called Prophetic Books, as we shall see, symbol is piled upon symbol, mythical figures contend, unite and divide till the mind refuses to follow their mutations, but at their wildest these Books keep a foot upon the earth whose realities Blake knew only too well.

The Industrial Revolution was one of these realities: a second was the French Revolution which began when Blake was just over 30 and had not yet written more than a handful of lyrics. The Revolution clearly released some hitherto enchained power in him and under its influence most of his greatest work was produced, not only the *Songs of Experience* and many similar poems that remained in manuscript till long after his death, but the longer poems in which that influence is most directly visible. *The Book of Thel* was written in 1789, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and *A Song of Liberty* in 1790, *The French Revolution* in 1791, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* and *America* in 1793, *Europe* and *The First Book of Urizen* in 1794.

Of these, *The French Revolution* as we have it is only a fragment of a longer work, and exists only in a single proof copy.

Apparently the publisher took fright at its outspokenness and abandoned the idea of its publication. The remainder, which was almost certainly written, has vanished. None of the other works came even as close as this to ordinary publication, but were engraved by Blake himself and issued with lovely hand-coloured marginal illustrations, somewhat recalling the illuminated manuscripts of the Middle Ages. This group of writings has in common a simple delight in the overthrow of tyranny and a confidence in the opening of a new age for France and the world. In them Blake voices, in his peculiar symbolic language, the hopes and beliefs which he shared with the radical circle of which he and Paine were active members. What is unique is Blake's dialectical thinking, for which no parallel exists anywhere in Europe at this date.

The fate of *The French Revolution* was a foretaste of the repression that was gathering over England. From 1783 there was a series of arrests, trials, transportations and penal Acts which broke up the London Corresponding Society, forced Paine into exile and made the open expression of radical opinions almost impossible. On the title page of Bishop Watson's attack on Paine Blake wrote:

> To defend the Bible in this year of 1798 would cost a man his life. The Beast and the Whore rule without control. (750)

In his symbolic language the Beast was the repressive state and the Whore the established church. We shall discover later what he meant by defending the Bible. In this atmosphere of violence and censorship Blake, like many others, went underground, his writing becomes progressively more cryptic, his myths continually more involved. 1800 to 1803 were the only years which he spent out of London.

But it was not only the censorship which oppressed him. The French Revolution followed its course, with the big bourgeoisie more and more firmly in control behind a military dictatorship. After Thermidor the Republic degenerated into the Directory, the Directory into the Empire. Europe was plunged into a war of which no one could foresee the end. It was no longer easy to see the clear issue between freedom and tyranny, the bright hopes of 1789 were evidently not being fulfilled. Blake began to turn away from politics in the narrower sense, realising that the struggle was

of a different and more complicated character than he had once suppose. So, in 1809, he wrote:

> I am really sorry to see my Countrymen trouble themselves about Politics.... Princes appear to me to be fools. Houses of Commons and Houses of Lords appear to me to be fools; they seem to me to be something Else besides Human Life. (629)

If this were all, Blake would only be one more romantic revolutionary, who, like Wordsworth, Southey and many others, recoiled before the harshness of revolution. But this was not all. Because Blake was a working man he never lost his class passion or his faith in a revolutionary solution. He continued to see life from below, and up to the end his writings are full of explosive comments about kings, Tories, priests and the oppression of the poor by the rich. And because he was a true poet he had a profound imaginative grasp of what was going on in his own country. England as well as France was changing in these years.

Under the stimulus of war, capitalism was developing at an unprecedented pace. The last peasantry were being expropriated by the enclosures, the long death of the hand weavers was about to begin, everywhere sprang up the Satanic Mills. Oppression was changing its face and Blake was one of the first to recognise a new enemy. Behind the familiar king and priest he saw the newer power of money and he recognised a new form of Satan's gospel in the writings of parson Malthus, the bastard science of whose 'Principle of Population' seemed to doom the vast majority of the human race to a perpetual and ever-increasing misery. When Blake seems sweeping in his condemnation of science it is the science which has made itself the justification of poverty and oppression which he has in mind.

It is the sense of these new developments which makes Blake's later poetry unique. In one sense the imagery grows mistier and more involved, in another it grows smokier and more evil, reflecting the hideous growth of industrialism. The generalised, Ossianic images of the earlier books are supplemented by images of forge, loom and furnace. Vala, wife of Albion, laments *among the Brick kilns*

> O Lord, wilt thou not look upon our sore afflictions
> Among these flames incessant labouring? Our hard masters laugh

> At all our sorrow. We are made to turn the wheel for water,
> To carry the heavy basket on our scorched shoulders, to sift
> The sand and ashes, and to mix the clay with tears and repentance ...
> Furrow'd with whips, and our flesh bruised with the heavy basket. (273)

As Dr Bronowski says:

> Although Blake's knowledge of industry was uncertain, his vision of it was not. It is an astonishing vision. The reader must turn the pages of the last prophetic books himself, at random: and find everywhere the same sooty imagery, the air belched by industry. Men of letters, whom the machine keeps clean, have groped through this sulphurous rhetoric for the names tidily listed in the books of mystics. The names are there, and they are worth the finding. But Swedenborg the mystic had been an inspector of mines; Paine the deist planned iron bridges; Blake the poet lived in the Industrial Revolution bitterly, in the decay of his engraver's craft. The oratory of *Vala or the Four Zoas*, of *Milton*, and of *Jerusalem* is loud with machines, with war, with law; the cry of man preying on man; and with the rebellious mutter of working men.[1]

The years in which Blake was writing and engraving *Milton* and *Jerusalem* were also years of the greatest hardship and poverty. Though he is now universally recognised as one of the supreme English engravers, Blake's style was then regarded as old fashioned and eccentric; commissions grew fewer and the old friends and patrons who had been prepared to pay small sums for his original work died or drifted away. On more than one occasion he was swindled by shady dealers.

'I am hid,' (770) he wrote about 1808, and

> The Enquiry in England is not whether a Man has Talents and Genius, But whether he is Passive and Polite and a Virtuous Ass and Obedient to Noblemen's Opinions in Arts and Science. If he is, he is a Good Man. If Not, he must be Starved. (779)

Blake might indeed have been starved, but for his good fortune in meeting in 1818 the young artist John Linnell, through whose help he was able to live while drawing and engraving his great series of illustrations to the Book of Job and to Dante. It was about this time that he wrote his last important poem *The Everlasting Gospel*. It is, for him, a new kind of poetry, in which his elaborate symbolism is abandoned for the barest and most direct statement with complete success. In it Jesus appears as the

last of his series of Promethean heroes at war with the Satanic forces of repression. The date of this poem is noteworthy. It is often suggested that Blake in his later life modified his ideas, coming closer to those of orthodox Christianity, yet the fact is that in this work of his old age they are expressed with the greatest clarity and sharpness. It is clear also, from the condition in which the text has reached us, that the ideas in *The Everlasting Gospel* were a constant preoccupation, something to which he constantly returned and never ceased to reshape.

Through Linnell, Blake met a number of young arists, who came to look upon him as their master, calling the two rooms off the Strand in which he lived 'The House of the Interpreter'.[2] None of the men who came under his influence at this time escaped being profoundly influenced, and this is especially true of Samuel Palmer who today is beginning to be recognised as one of the greatest of English painters. In a letter to Gilchrist, Blake's first biographer, Palmer gave a description which is certainly enthusiastic but which agrees in the main with all other contemporary accounts:

> He was energy itself, and shed around him a kindling influence; an atmosphere of life, full of the ideal. To walk with him in the country was to perceive the soul of beauty through the forms of matter; and the high, gloomy buildings between which, from his study window, a glimpse was caught of the Thames and the Surrey shore, assumed a kind of grandeur from the man dwelling near them. Those may laugh at this who never knew such a one as Blake; but of him it is the simple truth.
>
> He was a man without a mask; his aim single, his path straightforwards, and his wants few; so he was free, noble and happy ...
>
> His eye was the finest I ever saw: brilliant but not roving, clear and intent, yet susceptible; it flashed with genius, or melted in tenderness. It could also be terrible. Cunning and falsehood quailed under it, but it was never busy with them. It pierced them, and turned away.[3]

It was these young men who passed on to Gilchrist, to Rossetti and to Swinburne their knowledge of Blake. Gilchrist's *Life*, which appeared in 1863, led to the publication of editions of some of his works, and presently to a whole literature of commentaries and interpretations of very unequal value. The period of total neglect was followed by the period in which Blake became a

literary and artistic fashion. Is it too much to hope that we are now entering the age of understanding?

II The Dialectic Vision

As a young man Blake had stood firmly with Paine and Priestley, with the Deists and free-thinking radicals in defence of the French Revolution. He never abandoned his faith in the Revolution or ceased to treat his old allies with respect: yet their deepest thoughts were not his thoughts. He had many hard things to say about the Deists and the thinkers of the Enlightenment to whom they were closely related, yet in defending Paine against Bishop Watson he could write:

> Christ died as an Unbeliever and if the Bishops had their will so would Paine ... but he who speaks a word against the Son of man shall be forgiven. Let the Bishop prove that he has not spoken against the Holy Ghost, who in Paine strives with Christendom as in Christ he strove with the Jews. (755)

Years later, according to Crabb Robinson, Blake

> warmly declared that all he knew was in the Bible, but then he understands by the Bible the spiritual sense. For as to the natural sense, that Voltaire was commissioned by God to expose.[4]

He acknowledged the positive merit in Voltaire and Paine of attacking orthodox Christianity, which, to him, was 'Satan's Synagogue'. He condemned them, as he condemned Bacon, Newton and Locke, not so much because they were rationalists as because they were *mechanical* materialists. This mechanical materialism was the doctrine of capitalism in its age of growth and was accepted almost universally by both progressives and reactionaries. It had indeed, like capitalism itself, a progressive and a repressive face. William Godwin, for example, the philosopher of the most advanced radicals, still saw and thought in terms of the sovereign individual, governed by pure reason, without ties and without environment, a social counterpart to the eighteenth century atomistic science. Blake hated and attacked this atomism which isolated men within society, dividing him from his fellows. He understood that a man's thinking must depend on his class position:

> Does he who contemns poverty and he who turns with abhorrence
> From usury feel the same passion, or are they moved alike?
> How can the giver of gifts experience the delights of the merchant?
> How the industrious citizen the pains of the husbandman?
> How different far the fat fed hireling with hollow drum,
> Who buys whole cornfields into wastes, and sings upon the heath!
> How different their eyes and ear! how different the world to them! (197–8)

The creator in Blake's mythology, Urizen, creates by division and measurement, and is frequently identified with Newton and Locke, who share with him the symbolism of wheels and of the mathematically ordered stars. The starry wheels of Newton become the mill wheels of Satan:

> O Satan, my youngest born, art thou not Prince of the Starry Hosts
> And of the Wheels of Heaven, to turn the Mills day and night?
> Art thou not Newton's Pantocrator, weaving the Woof of Locke?
> To mortals thy Mills seem everything. (378)

Yet it would be wrong to class Blake with the irrationalists. He did not condemn reason but the isolation and blind worship of reason.

> The Treasures of Heaven are not the Negation of Passion, but Realities of Intellect, from which all the Passions Emanate uncurbed in their Eternal Glory,

he wrote (649–50), and, 'Go, put off Holiness And put on Intellect.' (558–9)

By Intellect he understood the whole of man's faculties, including both reason and imagination, properly co-ordinated. Reason uncontrolled, man's 'spectre', Blake saw as an enslaving force, delivering over society into the hands of the rich, the elaboration of *laissez faire* into a social religion. It was because they provided the philosophy for capitalist exploitation that Locke, Newton, Voltaire, all the thinkers of the Enlightenment, were condemned. Yet because Blake was himself a naturally dialectical thinker, he saw that this very mechanical materialism, while it was being used to enslave humanity, had yet within itself a potentially liberating force:

Mock on, Mock on Voltaire, Rousseau:
Mock on, Mock on: 'tis all in vain!
You throw the sand against the wind,
And the wind blows it back again.

And every sand becomes a Gem
Reflected in the beams divine;
Blown back they blind the mocking Eye,
But still in Israel's paths they shine.

The Atoms of Democritus
And Newton's Particles of light
Are sands upon the Red sea shore,
Where Israel's tents do shine so bright. (107)

Blake's dialectic method is implicit in all his work, in his mythology, his conception of man and society, in his view of history as a constant process of struggle and the reconciliation of opposites. But it is most clearly stated in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, the book in which he repaid his debt to Swedenborg:

> Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence.
>
> From these contraries spring what the religious call Good and Evil. Good is the passive that obeys Reason. Evil is the active springing from Energy ...
>
> Energy is Eternal Delight. (182)

Blake saw that we live in a world of division, and that division cannot be healed by pretending that it does not exist. He believed in brotherhood, but *not* that all men here and now are brothers: brotherhood could only be won by casting out error, by conflict and resolution. 'God keep you and me', he wrote in the last year of his life, 'from the divinity of yes and no too – the yea, nay, creeping Jesus – from supposing up and down to be the same thing, as all experimentalists must suppose.' (927) If the forigveness of sins is one pole of his thought, the casting out of error is the other. 'Severity of judgement is a great virtue' is his comment on one of Lavater's *Aphorisms*. (707)

This dialectic, Blake's twofold and threefold vision, as opposed to 'Single vision and Newton's sleep' (862) gives a new social quality to his central myth of the fall from innocence and the age-long struggle towards a new synthesis of innocence and

experience. Innocence is Blake's term for the whole man in whom reason and imagination are integrated, as well as for primitive classless society. This state he calls Beulah, a state existing in time but before history, a state of social, sexual and intellectual simplicity in which neither law nor morality had a place, a kind of spiritualised Land of Cokaygne. Beulah is, if you will, an idealisation of the peasant past to which there is no return, though fallen and divided man has always been troubled in his visions by the daughters of Beulah. It is Zion remembered by the waters of Babylon. With the division of society into classes man was divided also against himself: history and psychology is the record of these divisions and conflicts. Blake understood that the way forward is through experience. Man embraces knowledge, conflict, suffering and evil, and with them all he builds a new state, Jerusalem, in which innocence is included on a higher level.

Jerusalem is the entirely utopian symbol of all the later Prophetic Books. In them we find the Giant Albion who, in Blake's threefold vision, is at once England, the world and mankind. Albion has been betrayed by his children, who have rejected Jerusalem and chosen Babylon. He

> is cast forth to the Potter, his Children to the Builders
> To build Babylon because they have forsaken Jerusalem.
> The walls of Babylon are the Souls of Men, her Gates the Groans
> Of Nations, her Towers are the Miseries of once happy Families,
> Her Streets are paved with destruction, her Houses built with Death.
> Her Palaces with Hell and the Grave, her Synagogues with Torments
> Of ever-hardening Despair, squar'd and polish'd with cruel skill. (461)

Albion and his children have the power to choose Jerusalem, but they have preferred Babylon, the wilderness of squalor and exploitation which Blake saw the rulers of England creating around him. Yet the choice was continuous, and the world of the Prophetic Books is not only a world of building but a world of unending wars.

If Jerusalem is utopian, it is a utopia of a new kind. It is not an island to be discovered or a kingdom to be given laws, but a city to be built. And it is one of a vast series, rising and being destroyed throughout time. Each building becomes the starting point for a new fall and division and the founding of a new city. Because Blake cannot think otherwise than dialectically history can never come to a conclusion.

So for the first time we arrive at the beloved republic not by abstract speculation but by the transformation through struggle of what actually exists. This is shown clearly in the interactions of the figures of Blake's fantastic mythology. The conflict within and around man is symbolised by the conflicts between Urizen-Jehovah, the creator and oppressor, the god of things as they are, and a series of Promethean figures – Los, Orc and Fuzon. These figures, with their sons, daughters, wives, friends, enemies, spectres and emanations form a bewildering world which no one has yet fully comprehended, and any attempt to describe it briefly must necessarily be a gross over-simplification. Part of the difficulty arises because, while they stood for definite things to Blake, we have often only the vaguest clue as to what he meant by them. But still more it arises because they are genuinely mythological characters and not allegorical dummies each with a single label neatly attached.

Often they are or appear self-contradictory just because they are real, so that their behaviour and relationships, even their very natures, change with circumstances. Thus Urizen, who is the cold creator, creating without love and binding his creation with the chain of the law and moral codes, is the father of Los, symbol of prophecy, the eternal smith bringing order out of chaos. He creates in anger and love, and therefore 'kept the Divine Vision in time of trouble'. (563) But Los is in turn the father of Orc, the spirit of revolutionary terror and passion, the destroyer of oppression and error. Los shares the nature of both his father and son, and perhaps mediates between them, but because he is a living symbol dialectically and not mechanically conceived, he is never a mere compromise, a half-way house, between them. On the contrary, at one moment he will behave like Urizen, at another like Orc, at a third in a way that would be impossible to either. Similarly, Urizen is not only a figure of evil, the cruel father of men: he is also the 'Ancient of Days Striking the First Circle of the Earth' who appears in one of Blake's most magnificent designs, the skilled craftsman fabricating the universe. Like Voltaire and Newton he has a positive as well as a negative role, and in the end he is even capable of self-transformation:

> So Urizen spoke: he shook his snows from off his shoulders and arose
> As on a Pyramid of mist, his white robes scattering

> The fleecy white: renew'd, he shook his aged mantle off
> Into the fires. Then, glorious bright, Exulting in his joy,
> He sounding rose into the heavens in naked majesty,
> In radiant Youth. (352)

Blake sees the battle as fought simultaneously on a number of planes, as a conflict of cosmic forces but no less as a conflict in society and in the minds of men. Nor is it a mechanical clash of right and wrong. It is a dialectical interpenetration of opposites, a conflict of iron (Urizen represents the 'iron law of wages', Malthus' 'principle of population', the new iron machinery of factory production) and fire. Orc is consumer as well as liberator, destroying both the good and evil to create the better, while Los, who in the earlier Books is Time and Prophecy, comes more and more to stand for metallurgy, the new creative technique of the age, in which fire and iron are creatively brought together. Los is complex because he is a true revolutionary symbol:

> The blow of his Hammer is Justice, the swing of his Hammer Mercy,
> The force of Los's Hammer is eternal forgiveness. (553)

His female counterpart, Enitharmon, begins as Imagination, but she also becomes transformed into an industrial symbol; to her belongs the loom, and she, like Los, is at times corrupted and becomes a repressive force.

Out of the tormented fragments of divided Albion Loss and Enitharmon build Golgonooza, a bright city of art and science rising out of a waste land:

> Here, on the banks of the Thames, Los builded Golgonooza,
> Outside of the Gates of the Human Heart beneath Beulah
> In the midst of the rocks of the Altars of Albion. In fears
> He builded it, in rage and in fury. It is the Spiritual Fourfold
> London, continually building and continually decaying desolate. (500)

Golgonooza is not Jerusalem, but it is not therefore to be despised. It is the positive side of bourgeois civilisation and culture, a battle won for order out of chaos, in the teeth of the Beast and the Whore. Yet in the end it too has to be overthrown to make way for Jerusalem. The historical symbolism of this seems clear today: one can only speculate how far Blake was consciously aware of it. Not entirely perhaps, but surely to a certain extent,

and just because his myths are true myths they are capable of an extended validity and application.

Jerusalem is the outcome of the struggles of the Prometheans, of Divine Humanity, but precisely of their struggle to transform Urizen, who represents the material world as well as its creator: iron is none the less iron because it becomes molten, but it can then be shaped to the service of men. It is when he comes to describe this Jerusalem that Blake is least successful. After hundreds of pages it remains an abstraction veiled in a bright fog of words:

> O lovely mild Jerusalem! O Shiloh of Mount Ephraim!
> I see thy Gates of precious stones, thy Walls of gold and silver.
> Thou art the soft reflected Image of the Sleeping Man
> Who, stretch'd on Albion's rocks, reposes amidst his Twenty-eight
> Cities, where Beulah lovely terminates in the hills and valleys of Albion,
> Cities not yet embedded in Time and Space; plant ye
> The Seeds, O Sisters, in the bosom of Time and Space's womb,
> To spring up for Jerusalem, lovely shadow of Sleeping Albion. (550)

Blake was faced with a problem he could never solve. The new world of smoke and wheels and misery in which nevertheless new hopes and potentialities were beginning to arise, and which it is his peculiar glory to have been the first to grasp imaginatively as a whole, yet left him bewildered and helpless. In this, as in other respects, his special position as a skilled craftsman in an age passing into mass production, was both a strength and a weakness. He saw that there must be a solution, but too few terms of the equation were given for him to be able to find it, so all the Prophetic Books are full of confused battles that never come to a climax and of the building of fabulous cities only that they may be destroyed. In one sense this is because, as a dialectician, he knew that history never ends, and in another because, as a utopian he could not see clearly the next step.

The remoteness and abstraction which we feel in Blake's conception of Jerusalem is also in part due to the shapelessness which is the great defect of all his longer poems. Blake, who could compress more meaning into a couple of lines than any other poet, tended to lose his sense of direction in the vast epics in which he tried to expound, with far too many details and endless repetitions, his whole conception of the scheme of things. When

he is content to write simply 'Jerusalem is called Liberty, among the Children of Albion,' (500) we can see at once that its building is directly related in his mind to the contemporary situation. He emphasises this repeatedly by stressing the identity between Jerusalem and London. Jerusalem is to be built not in some remote place but in Lambeth, Paddington and Islington. And that the work is to be done not in some distant future but proceeds already is made clear when he descends to explain his purposes in plain prose: the end of the golden string is already in man's hand.

> I know of no other Christianity and of no other Gospel than the Liberty of both mind and body to exercise the Divine Arts of Imagination ... Answer this to yourselves, and expel from among you those who pretend to despise the labours of Art and Science, which alone are the labours of the Gospel. Is not this plain and manifest to the thought? Can you think at all and not pronounce heartily That to labour in Knowledge is to build up Jerusalem, and to despise Knowledge is to despise Jerusalem and her Builders? ... Let every Christian, as much as in him lies, engage himself openly and publicly before all the World in some Mental pursuit for the Building up of Jerusalem. (535-6)

Because he spoke so constantly of vision, prophecy and inspiration his thought has been often misunderstood. He never pretended that his visions were objectively real: they were real only because he saw them. He rejected entirely any suggestion that they came, or could come, from outside the world which he knew, and his quarrel with orthodox religion was not only that it denied the imagination but that it claimed an other-worldly sanction for its pretensions, bribing men with 'allegorical' promises of reward or punishment in some future life. This false vision is 'The lost Traveller's Dream under the Hill.' (579)

Vision to Blake meant no more than an honest man looking at the world. True, 'A fool sees not the same tree that a wise man sees,' (183) and Blake saw many things that seem strange to most of us.

> I see Every thing I paint In This World, but Every body does not see alike. To the Eyes of a Miser a Guinea is far more beautiful than the Sun and a bag worn with the use of Money has more beautiful proportions than a Vine filled with Grapes, (835)

he wrote to a certain Revd Dr Trusler who had ventured to question the authenticity of his vision, and later he elaborated the same thought:

> 'What,' it will be Question'd, 'When the Sun rises, do you not see a round disk of fire somewhat like a Guinea?' O no, no, I see an Innumerable company of the Heavenly host crying, 'Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty.' I question not my Corporeal or Vegetative Eye any more than I would Question a Window concerning a Sight. I look thro' it and not wish it. (652)

Such passages easily can be and often have been misunderstood, but when we understand what he meant by God and when we remember how he despised the worship of money, it is not difficult to see that Blake is really expressing his sense that the sun is the true source of life and wealth upon whose powers man depends. His expression of this idea may be thought eccentric, but it is neither irrational nor insane, and what he is saying is no more than a plain truth which his contemporaries only too often neglected.

III The Everlasting Gospel

The symbolism of the Prophetic Books often seems both grotesque and obscure because Blake was not able to relate his reality to that of everyday life. But sometimes it is deliberately obscure because he was secretive and did not wish his meaning to be too readily understood. We have seen how the repression under which he lived forced him to conceal his thoughts and to retreat farther and farther into them. But this is only part of the truth. The repression was real, the danger of speaking out was considerable, but the tendency to retreat was there from the start. It may have been, as Dr Bronowski suggests, a personal peculiarity, but still more, I believe, it was a characteristic of the obscure and often persecuted sects in the midst of which Blake grew up. These sects tended to regard themselves as the possessors and guardians of a secret doctrine, not to be lightly revealed to the uninitiated.

> The Vision of Christ that thou dost see
> Is my Vision's Greatest Enemy:
> Thine has a great hook nose like thine,
> Mine has a snub nose like to mine:
> Thine is the friend of All Mankind,

> Mine speaks in parables to the Blind:
> Thine loves the same world that mine hates,
> Thy Heaven doors are my Hell Gates ...
> Both read the Bible day and night,
> But thou read'st black where I read white. (133)

What was this doctrine, which could only be disclosed in parables? And how did Blake come to share it?

While his peculiar mythology is his own, there is a body of ideas within it for which sources may be found, and a great variety of suggestions have been made as to these sources. Among them are the teachings of Swedenborg, of Jacob Boehme, of the Jewish Kaballa and the early Gnostic heretics. It is quite possible that any or all of these may have influenced Blake at first, or third hand: certainly he acknowledges a debt to Swedenborg and Boehme. The point is, I think, that Swedenborg, Boehme and many others share a common tradition, in which Blake also had a share. Before we begin to search the ends of the earth we would do well to look on his own doorstep, and see if it is not possible to find what we are looking for in the teachings of the Antinomian sects who flourished in England, and above all in London, during the revolutionary decades of the seventeenth century.

Though the name Antinomian was sometimes applied in the seventeenth century to a particular sect, it can also be used more broadly for a variety of sects and groups, not united in beliefs or by organisation but holding a set of related doctrines and often not easily to be distinguished from one another. Thus Thomas Edwards, an extremely hostile witness, writes of the interconnections of these sects in 1646:

> The Sect of Seekers growes very much, and all sorts of Sectaries turn Seekers [and soon] all the other Sects of Independents, Brownists, Antinomians, Anabaptists will be swallowed up by the Seekers *alias* libertines ... and the issue of these Sects and Schisms will be, that all will end in a loosenesse and licentiousness of living.[5]

After 1646 the confusion probably became greater rather than less, with the rise of new sects like the Ranters, Quakers and Muggletonians, all of whom were to a certain degree antinomian.

It is not possible to prove that Blake borrowed directly from any of these, to show, for example, that he had read any of the works of Muggleton, or of Abiezer Coppe the Ranter. What can be

shown is that he and they shared a common body of ideas and expressed those ideas in a common language. We can show, too, that many of the sects of the seventeenth century, Quakers, Muggletonians and Traskites, for example, did survive in London till Blake's time. And it is certain that they persisted most strongly, as they had sprung up originally, among the artisans and petty tradesmen of the thickly peopled working-class quarters. These were exactly the social circles and the geographical areas in which Blake was born and in which his whole life was passed. When, therefore, we find, not in one or two isolated cases but throughout his work, the closest similarities between his thought and the thought recorded among the sects a hundred years earlier, there seems to me the strongest presumption that he was the heir to a tradition and that to understand this tradition will help us to understand Blake himself.

So far this has not been attempted, except in the special case of Milton. This has been explored thoroughly by Professor Denis Saurat, and I do not propose to go over any of the ground he has covered.[6] In any case the relationship of Blake and Milton was one of antagonism as well as admiration. The much more popular tradition of Antinomianism was that in which Blake shared fully and which provided him with a general framework of ideas.

And first of all, it was a tradition of revolution. The Seekers, Ranters and the rest flourished when England had overthrown the feudal order in a civil war and when it seemed to thousands that a new age was about to begin. Their ideas, fantastic as they sometimes appear to us, were a reflection of their hopes: in essence they were political ideas in a religious form. A new age was indeed beginning, but it was not the age they had expected. Even during the Republic they were often persecuted, and after the restoration of the monarchy in 1660 they were driven underground, preserving their faith in little, obscure conventicles, treasuring subversive pamphlets in old cupboards, holding the ideas of the revolution, as it were, in suspension, until towards the end of the eighteenth century, the world seemed ready for them again. Like Los, they 'kept the Divine Vision in time of trouble'.

In fact, the language of revolution was changing, and the old ideas were barely intelligible to the men who listened to Paine and Thelwall, and mere crazy nonsense to the more sophisticated followers of Bentham. Nevertheless they did provide a means of

communication for a great poet: Blake's tragedy was that he was speaking a language which was already becoming obsolete. He was the greatest English Antimonian, but also the last.

Before going on to consider in detail his debt to the seventeenth century it will be as well to summarise the group of doctrines that make Antinomianism in the broad sense. They are closely related, but can conveniently be taken under four main heads.

First, there is the group of ideas dealing with the nature of God and with his relation to man. All the Antinomians believed that God existed in man, most that he existed in all created things, and many that he had no other existence. Blake held this last opinion.

Second, there is the conception that the moral and ceremonial law is no longer binding on God's people, that it was the result of a curse which has now been lifted and that the orthodoxy which attempts to impose it is anti-christian.

Third, and closely related to this, is the whole complex of ideas associated with the phrase, the Everlasting Gospel, a phrase which Blake took as the title of his last great poem.

And fourth, arising from all these, there is the symbolism of the destruction of Babylon and the building of Jerusalem, a symbolism with which Blake's work is packed and whose relevance to an age of revolution hardly needs emphasis.

All these doctrines are so interconnected that it is hardly possible to follow each thread separately. It will be convenient to start with the idea of the Everlasting Gospel, around which the rest seems to adhere and which lies so much at the centre of Blake's thought. The origin of this doctrine goes back to the twelfth century Italian mystic Joachim of Flora. He taught that the history of the world fell into three ages, those of the Father, the Son and of the Holy Ghost. The first was the age of fear and servitude, and ended with the death of Christ, the second was the age of faith and filial obedience, and the third, which was to be expected shortly, was the age of love and spiritual liberty for the children of God. The scripture of the first age was the Old Testament, of the second the New Testament. In the coming age of the spirit the full truth of the Everlasting Gospel will be revealed, not in a new sacred book but in a new revelation of the spiritual sense of the Bible with which God will illuminate the hearts of men. In this age God will be within man and therefore all existing forms of worship, ceremonies, churches, legal and moral

codes will become superfluous. Instead of appearing as a force from without, God will now be within, and the unity of God and man will be fully accomplished.

This is precisely the doctrine to which Blake refers when he writes:

> God Appears and God is Light
> To those poor Souls who dwell in Night,
> But does a Human Form Display
> To those who Dwell in Realms of day. (121)

and we can find it equally clearly in the beliefs which Samuel Fisher ascribes to the Ranters:

> Till Christ Come [means to the Ranters] His coming into men by his Spirit, or in such full measures and manifestations of his Spirit into men's hearts, that they may be able to live up with him in spirit, so as no more to need such lower helps from outward administrations ... to preach, break bread, to build one another in faith, search the Scriptures, etc., 'twas a way of God for men's edification till Christ the morning star shined, to which men did well to take heed, as unto a light that shined in a dark place, but now the day has dawned and the day star arises in men's hearts, yea, the day breaks and the shadows flee away; and Christ comes as a swift Roe and young hart upon the mountains of Bether.[7]

From twelfth century Italy to Blake's England seems a long journey, yet it is one that we can follow almost step by step. Joachite ideas are to be found in France among the followers of Amalric of Bena at the end of the twelfth century and among the German Brethren of the Free Spirit at the thirteenth.[8] In the sixteenth century the Familists and the closely related 'Spirituels' appear in Germany and Holland. Robert Barclay says of these 'Spirituels' that they

> held that they were called to inaugurate the last dispensation. The dispensation of Moses and Christ was to be succeeded by that of the Holy Spirit, or of Elias, and this time had come. The Apostles, and after them the Church, had only known the Lord 'in a figure'. The times were now come in which the knowledge of a new spiritual and living Christ – mystically hidden from the time of Christ and the Apostles – is now immediately revealed to the Christian.[9]

Of the Familists' teacher, Henry Nicholas, Ephraim Pagitt writes:

> This deceiver describeth eight throughbreakings of light (as he termeth them) to have been in 8 several times, from *Adam* to the time that now is, which (as hee saith) have each exceeded other. The seventh he allowed Jesus Christ to be the publisher of, and his light to be the greatest of all that ever were before him; and he maketh his own to be the last and greatest, and the perfection of all, in and by which Christ is perfected, meaning holinesse; he maketh every one of his Familie of *Love* to be Christ; yea, and God, and himself God, and Christ in a more excellent manner, saying that he is godded with God and co-deified with him, and that God is hominified with him. These horrible blasphemies with divers others, doth this H.N. and his Familie teach to be the Everlasting Gospel.[10]

Thomas Munzer, the leader of the great peasant insurrection in Germany in 1525, was another who came under the influence of the writings of Joachim. 'This doctrine of the Everlasting Gospel worked on Munzer like the interior fires in a volcanic land', writes Richard Heath.[11] Through Munzer it affected the whole Anabaptist movement in Germany.

Another channel of Joachite ideas was Jacob Boehme, whose works began to appear in English translations in the 1640s. Several were published by Giles Calvert, who was first a Ranter and afterwards a Quaker. Blake refers to Boehme several times and was probably acquainted with some of his writing at first hand.

Towards the end of the sixteenth century the Familists were well established in England, where they presently merged with the seekers and other antinomian sects. By the time of the Revolution Joachite ideas, in various forms, were widespread. Thomas Edwards, whose *Gangraena* is an encyclopedia of the 'Errours, Heresies, Blasphemies and pernicious Practices of the Sectaries of this time', mentions those who declare:

> That by Christ's death, all the sins of all the men in the world, Turks, Pagan, as well as Christians committed against the moral Law and first Covenant, are actually pardoned and forgiven, and this is the everlasting Gospel.[12]

and that

> There is a salvation that shall be revealed in the last times, which was not known to the Apostles themselves.[13]

It is of particular interest that the first of these passages links the phrase the Everlasting Gospel with the doctrine of the forgiveness of sins, exactly as Blake links it over a century later.

In a very cursory study of the pamphlet literature of the time I have found six places where the phrase 'the Everlasting Gospel' is used.[14] No doubt a more thorough search would reveal others. In any case, the doctrine for which it stood was far more widespread, and is to be found, in a more or less complete form, in the writings of such men as John Saltmarsh, William Erbery, Thomas Collier, Tobias Crisp and John Eaton among many others. With the appearance of the Ranters about 1649 English Antinomianism assumed its most uncompromising form.

IV Blake and the Ranters

The Ranters as a sect were bitterly attacked and persecuted from the start, were soon crushed, and have never since been given the attention which they deserve. No doubt the behaviour of many of them was extravagant, and they often expressed their views in ways which shocked their contemporaries, but at their highest, in the work of such men as Coppe, Joseph Salmon and the near-Ranter Richard Coppin, there is a fervour and a wild poetry that is both moving and effective.

Perhaps the clearest account of Ranter doctrine is to be found in *The Smoke of the Bottomless Pit* by John Holland (1651). Though this is, as the title indicates, a hostile account, there is little in it that cannot be fairly deduced from acknowledged Ranter writings: Holland appears to be sincere when he says in his Preface that he does not intend

> to make their persons odious in any way, much lesse to stir up any to persecute them barely for their judgements; for when I consider what the Scripture saith, I find it is not God's method to deal with Spiritual enemies with carnal weapons.[15]

This is an attitude of restraint extremely rare in the anti-Ranter literature of the time, much of which is of the lowest kind.

The main body of the pamphlet summarises Ranter teachings on a number of points, and it is instructive to compare some of these with Blake's views about the same subjects.

> First Concerning God
>
> They maintain that God is essential in every creature, and that there is as much of God in one creature, as in another, though he doth not manifest himself so much in one as in another: I saw this expression in a Book of theirs, that the essence of God was as much in the ivie leaf as in the most glorious Angel.[16]

This may be compared with Blake's statements in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* that 'God only Acts and Is in existing beings or Men,' (188) and

> The worship of God is: Honouring his gifts in other men, each according to his genius, and loving the greatest men best: those who envy and calumniate great men hate God; for there is no other God. (191)

The belief which Blake shared with the Ranters that God only exists in existing beings or men can be followed logically to the conclusion that only God really exists, but equally logically to the opposite conclusion that what we call God is no more than a form of the movement of matter. Both he and they did in practice manage to combine both conclusions, and it is difficult to see that when Blake spoke of God, or, as he liked to do, of Divine Humanity, he meant anything more than the quality in man which distinguishes him from the animals – his intellect, his imagination and his capacity for pity.

Since God existed in man, and was entirely good, the Ranters argued that all human acts were performed by God and so could not be sinful. Hence, the moral law could have no validity for them.

> Concerning the Commandments of God they say that all the Commandments of God, both in the Old and New Testaments, are fruits of the Curse, and that all men being free from the curse, are also free from the Commandments.... Concerning sinne, That there is no such thing as that which men call sin, that sin and holinesse are all one to God, and that God delights as much in the one as in the other.[17]

So Blake's Jesus in *The Everlasting Gospel* (it must be remembered that he is not the historical Jesus of Joachim's second age, but the spiritual Jesus of the third) overthrows the Moral Law:

He laid his hand on Moses' Law:
The Ancient Heavens, in Silent Awe
Writ with Curses from Pole to Pole,
All away began to roll:

declaring meanwhile:

'Good and Evil are no more!
Sinai's trumpets, cease to roar!
Cease, finger of God, to write!
The Heavens are not clean in thy Sight.
Thou art Good, and thou Alone;
Nor may the sinner cast one stone.
To be Good only, is to be
A God or else a Pharisee....' (139–40)

The effect of these doctrines, even in the crude form in which they were held by the Ranters, still more as Blake developed them, is to emphasise the dignity of man: 'God becomes as we are, that we may be as he is.' (148)

So the Ranters say:

Concerning man, that man cannot either know God, or beleeve in God, or pray to God, but it is God in man that knoweth himself, believes in himself, and prayeth to himself.[18]

This passage Blake seems almost literally to paraphrase in *The Everlasting Gospel*:

If thou humblest thyself, thou humblest me;
Thou also dwell'st in Eternity,
Thou art a Man, God is no more,
Thy own humanity learn to adore ... (138)

And in *Jerusalem* he wrote:

Then Los grew furious, raging: 'Why stand we here trembling around
Calling on God for help, and not ourselves, in whom God dwells,
Stretching a hand to save the falling Man?' (487)

Antinomianism can be a negative and inhibiting creed, but in favourable circumstances it may engender a pride that is a truly revolutionary virtue.

As God in Man becomes a heroic symbol, so heaven and hell,

and all rewards, threats and sanctions outside human life become symbols of unreality: 'They teach that there is neither heaven nor hell but what is in man.'[19] In this spirit Blake declares that the Treasures of Heaven are nothing other than 'Mental Studies and Performances' (535) and of hell:

> I do not believe there is such a thing literally, but hell is the being shut up in the possession of corporeal desires which shortly weary the man, for ALL LIFE IS HOLY. (717)

It was this freedom from other-worldly fears which made it possible for him to write with such freedom and high spirits of Hell and Devil in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, and when he praises Milton for being 'a true Poet and of the Devil's party without knowing it', (192) he differed only in degree of sophistication from the Ranter who is alleged to have said 'he hoped to see the poor Devil cleared of a great many slanders that had been cast upon him'.[20]

Nearest of all to Blake is that strange genius, Abiezer Coppe, now remembered, if at all, for the acid little biography allotted to him by Anthony Wood.[21] Unlike Blake, Coppe followed the logic of his Antinomianism into grotesque excess, and this, as Blake knew, is one of the dangers of Antinomianism. The Everlasting Gospel is no guide for fools: 'The Wicked will turn it to Wickedness, the Righteous to Righteousness.' (463) he wrote, much in the spirit of Tobias Crisp's solution of the same problem:

> The grass and pasture is so sweet that he [God] hath put a beleever into, that though there be no bounds in such a soule, yet it will never goe out of this fat pasture to feed on a barren common.[22]

Nevertheless, as he also knew, 'The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom,' (183) and Coppe in his two main writings *A Fiery Flying Roll* (1650) and his Preface to Coppin's *Divine Teachings* (1649) arrived by this road at a wisdom not entirely unlike Blake's own.

A Fiery Flying Roll, with its symbolic and sometimes fanciful treatment of heaven and hell, of inspiration and of the ways of God with man, with its bizarre expressions of a genuine fervour, and its almost sulphurous atmosphere of spiritual war, constantly reminds us both of the Prophetic Books and *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*.

Coppe insists that the new world of the Everlasting Gospel come only in agony and conflict:

> But behold, behold, he is now risen with a witnesse, to save *Zion* with vengeance, or to confound and plague all things into himself; who by his mighty Angell is proclaiming (with a loud voyce) That Sin and Transgression is finished and ended; and everlasting righteousnesse brought in; and the everlasting Gospell preaching; Which everlasting Gospell is brought in with most terrible earth-quakes, and heaven-quakes, and with signes and wonders following.[23]

Just so Blake insists that the building of Jerusalem which is called Liberty begins with the Harrowing of Hell:

> The God of this World raged in vain:
> He bound Old Satan in his Chain,
> And bursting forth, his furious ire
> Became a Chariot of fire.
> Throughout the land he took his course,
> And traced diseases to their source:
> He curs'd the Scribe and Pharisee,
> Trampling down Hipocrisy:
> Where'er his Chariot took its way,
> There Gates of death let in the day,
> Broke down every Chain and Bar;
> And Satan in his Spiritual War
> Drag'd at his Chariot wheels: loud howl'd
> The God of this World: louder roll'd
> The Chariot Wheels, and louder still
> His voice was heard from Zion's hill. (134)

In this conflict the natural man is consumed and destroyed in order to be born again:

> Whate'er is Born of Mortal Birth
> Must be consumed with the Earth
> To rise from Generation free:
> Then what have I to do with thee? (79)

Coppe describes this from his own experience with an extraordinary vividness:

> First, all my strength, my forces were utterly routed, my house I dwelt in fired; my father and mother forsook me, the wife of my bosome loathed me, mine old name was rotted, perished; and I was utterly

> plagued, consumed, damned, rammed and sunk into nothing, with the bowels of the still Eternity (my mothers wombe) out of which I came naked, and whereto I returned again naked. And lying a while there, rapt up in silence, at length (the body or outward forme being awake all this while) I heard with my outward eare (to my apprehension) a most terrible thunderclap, and after that a second. And after the second thunderclap, which was exceeding terrible, I saw a great body of light, like the light of the sun, and red as fire, in the forme of a drum (as it were) whereupon with exceeding trembling and amazement of the flesh, and with joy unspeakable in the Spirit, I clapt my hands, and cryed out, *Amen, Halelujah, Halelujah Amen*. And so lay trembling, sweating and smoking (for the space of half an houre) at length with a loud voyce (I inwardly) cryed out, Lord, what wilt thou do with me; my most excellent majesty and eternall glory (in me) answered and sayd, Fear not, I will take thee up into my everlasting Kingdom. But thou shalt (first) drink a bitter cup, a bitter cup, a bitter cup; whereupon (being filled with exceeding amazement) I was throwne into the belly of Hell (and take what you can of it in these expressions, though the matter is beyond expression) I was among all the Devils in hell, even in their most hideous crew.
>
> And under all this terrour and amazement, there was a little spark of transcendent, unspeakable glory, which survived, and sustained itself, triumphing, exulting and exalting itself above all the Fiends. [4]

What was consumed, in each case, was not sin but holiness, the 'dark self-righteous pride' of Blake's phrase. It was not upon the tongue of the 'rich learned Pharisee' that Jesus wrote 'with Iron pen', 'Ye must be born again.' (136)

> Which Pharisee, in man is the mother of harlots, and being the worst whore, cries whore first: and the grand blasphemer, cries out Blasphemy, blasphemy, which she is brimfull of....
>
> But the hour is coming, yea now is, That all his carnal, outward, formal Religion (yea of Scripturely cognizance, so far as its fleshly and formal) and all his fleshly holiness, zeal and devotion shall be, and is, set upon the same account, as outward drunkenness, theft, murther and adultery ...
>
> Yea the time is coming, That zealous, holy, devout righteous, religious men shall (one way) dye, for their Holines and Religion, as well as Thieves and Murtherers – for their Theft and Murther.[25]

Blake, Coppe and all Antinomians condemned formal Christianity because it based itself on this pharisaic holiness and set up arbitrary standards by which it accused and condemned. Blake had two common terms for the orthodox church, both of which were also current among seventeenth century Antinomians.

First he called it Rahab, just as Coppe called it 'the well favoured Harlot',[26] and Roger Crab 'that House of the Whore's merchandise'.[27]

That is why, according to Edwards,

> An Antinomian Preacher in London on a Fast Day said it was better for Christians to be drinking in a Ale-house, or to be in a whorehouse, than to be keeping fasts legally.[28]

And why Blake wrote in one poem:

> Dear Mother, dear Mother, the Church is cold,
> But the Ale-house is healthy and friendly and warm. (74)

and in another turns from the serpent-polluted church

> ... into a sty
> And laid me down among the swine. (87)

Blake's other term was Satan's Synagogue, for his Satan is 'the Accuser who is the God of this World' who is 'worship'd by the Names Divine of Jesus and Jehovah' – in fact the God who is worshipped by orthodox Christians. (579) (He is on no account to be confused with the friendly Devils of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell.*) In just this sense Richard Coppin, on trial at Worcester for sundry blasphemies, was charged:

> First that I should say, That they were evil Angels (meaning the Minister who preached the Gospel of Christ) that told people of damnation, and that such ought to be heard or believed.[29]

Orthodox Christianity was not merely a corruption of Christianity as Blake understood it, but its absolute inversion, and it was in no rhetorical sense that he wrote: 'The Modern Church Crucifies Christ with the head Downward.' (650) From another point of view Satan-Jehovah was a form of Urizen, the ice-cold creator, and in this connection there is a curious parallel between Blake and the Muggletonians, another Joachite sect who certainly survived in London in some strength at Blake's time.[30] According to them there were three Ages or 'Records', those of Moses, of Jesus and of Reeves and Muggleton, and these were the Records respectively of Water, Blood and Spirit:

> This Record of *Moses* upon Earth is that Record of Water, answering and bearing Testimony to that one God the Father and Creator of all things both in Heaven and Earth.[31]

Now water was also the element of Urizen, and in the second of his *Songs of Experience* Blake wrote:

> Prison'd on wat'ry shore,
> Starry jealousy does keep my den:
> Cold and hoar,
> Weeping o'er,
> I hear the father of the ancient men. (69)

The resemblance may be accidental, but it is extremely probable that Blake had met Muggletonians, especially as their doctrines are in some ways very similar to those of his early master Swedenborg. It is, indeed, Swedenborg and the Muggletonians who complete the living chain connecting the age of Joachim of Flora with that of Blake.[32]

In many of his *Proverbs of Hell* Blake voices his detestation of this restrictive holiness:

> He who desires but acts not, breeds pestilence.
> Prisons are built with Bricks of Law, Brothels with Stones of Religion.
> As the Caterpillar choses the fairest leaves to lay her eggs on, so the Priest lays his curses on the fairest joys.
> Damn braces. Bless relaxes. (183–4)

Coppe, once more, provides the best parallels:

> [I] had rather heare a mighty Angell (in man) swearing a full-mouthed Oath ... cursing and making others fall a-swearing, than heare a zealous Presbyterian, Independent or spirituall Notionist pray, preach, or exercise.
>
> Well, One hint more; there's swearing ignorantly, i'th darke, vainely, and there's swearing i'th light, gloriously.[33]

And:

> Kisses are numbered among transgressors – base things – well! by base hellish swearing, and cursing ... and by base impudent kisses ... my plaguy holiness hath been confounded, and thrown into the lake of brimstone.[34]

The last phrase reminds us that Blake, who had written of 'The Spectre of Man, the *Holy* Reasoning Power,' (442) wrote also:

> Each man is in his Spectre's power
> Untill the arrival of that hour
> When his humanity awake
> And cast his own Spectre into the Lake. (108)

Indeed, the resemblances between Blake and Coppe are so numerous and so striking that it is tempting if unprofitable to wonder if Blake had not seen somewhere a copy of *A Fiery Flying Roll*. No proof is ever likely to be forthcoming, and the *Roll*, which was burnt by Order of Parliament in 1650, cannot have been common. Yet the very fact of its burning would induce those who valued it to preserve it the more carefully, and I do not think that it is at all impossible that Blake, considering the circles among which he moved in London, may have stumbled on a copy in the house of some friend who belonged to an old dissenting family. The probability that he knew men who had preserved the doctrines of Coppe and the Ranters must surely be much greater.

In this context it may be worth looking afresh at the old story of Blake and his wife being found by Thomas Butts sitting naked in their garden at Lambeth.[35] Coppe, it was said, was accustomed:

> to preach stark naked many blasphemies and unheard of villanies in the daytime, and in the night be drunk and lye with a wench that had also been his hearer stark naked.[36]

This he denied, declaring that the pamphlets in which such charges were made were:

> scandalous and bespattered with Lyes and Forgeries, in setting me in front of such actions which I never did, which my soul abhors; such things which mine eyes never beheld, and words which my tongue never spake, and mine ears never heard.[37]

There is no need to doubt the sincerity of this denial, or that many similar accusations made against the Ranters were equally false. Nevertheless, when all allowances have been made for malice and exaggeration, I think there is sufficient reason to believe that they did at times practice what may be described as a kind of ritual nudism.[38]

This would certainly be in keeping with Ranter doctrine. Clothes were a token of the loss of innocence, of the knowledge of good and evil which came from the fall, and of the curse which accompanied this knowledge. A return to nakedness was symbolic of the lifting of the curse and the abrogation of the moral law. Some argued that the curse had never existed, or the law ever been valid, since the sin of Adam was visited on him alone and not on the whole of mankind.[39] For them, as for Blake, original sin was an invention of the Churches, the gospel of Satan.

At any rate, Adam in innocence, in Beulah, as Blake might have said, was naked and unashamed; it was upon the fallen Adam that God placed clothes: for the regenerate Adam of the new time they were no longer necessary except for purposes of use and comfort. It is therefore interesting at least that when Thomas Butts found Blake in the garden (and Blake's garden, with the vine which he refused to prune, was itself symbolic) he was greeted with the words: 'Come in! it's only Adam and Eve you know!'[40]

Gilchrist may have been right in supposing that they were 'reciting passages from *Paradise Lost*, in character', but this reference to Adam is too characteristic of the thought of Blake and of the earlier Antinomians to be so easily accounted for. The third Adam was part of the Ranter Mythology. So John Robins, 'the God of the Shakers', was asked in prison:

> Why do your followers term you the third *Adam*? To that I answer particularly (said he) in the behalf of myself. So I am, for these reasons. The first *Adam* was made a living soul, the second, a quickening spirit, and in this law stands all the councel of God the Father. The first, the servant of Death appointed; the second, the Son of life therewith foreordained. And I am the third *Adam* that must gain what the first lost.[41]

Whether the story is true or not, it is entirely consistent with the whole of Blake's work both as poet and artist. The naked human form was his supreme symbol of the divine in man and of the liberation of the spirit, and even when his figures are draped, as much of the form as is possible is revealed. In this he was not uninfluenced by the fashions of the age. It may be worth recalling that the years he spent at Lambeth (1793–1800) correspond roughly with the years in which the influence of the French Revolution on clothes, especially women's clothes, was at its height. It was then the fashion to wear light, close fitting and

sometimes almost transparent dresses: there has never perhaps been a period in which women wore so little. The French sense of liberation swept across the Channel in spite of the war and the politically repressive government. The effect on Blake's art may be seen in such a picture as *The Wise and Foolish Virgins*, painted about 1810. Blake's Virgins wear dresses that, with minor alterations, would have been by no means conspicuous in fashionable society a few years earlier. Similarly, his illustrations to Mary Wollstonecraft's *Original Stories from Real Life* (1791), almost his only drawings of contemporary subjects, show how closely his style was suited to, and perhaps influenced by, the costume of the period.

Finally, in considering this story of Blake in the garden, we should not forget the element of humour and fantasy in his make-up, or the very unconventional ways in which it found expression. He loved to startle and provoke and to say and do things, which might still convey his most serious beliefs, in a half-jesting manner. He probably enjoyed the confusion of the worthy Mr Butts. And here, too, we can find a link with the Ranters, who also were in the habit of flouting convention and expressing their doctrines in the coarsest kind of jesting. Blake, in such a poem as *When Klopstock England defied* (103), is related closely enough to the Ranter who, it was said,

> sitting in his cups (with the rest of his companions) evacuating *wind backwards*, used this blasphemous expression, let everything that hath breath, praise the Lord.[42]

V Jerusalem is Called Liberty

We have seen already something of what Blake made of the symbols of Jerusalem and Babylon, symbols that perhaps present themselves inevitably in a revolutionary age to men whose principal reading is the Bible. Here, too, he was following a well established tradition.

The Seeker William Erbery links the coming of Jerusalem with the third age of the Everlasting Gospel:

> I hear a sound of the new Jerusalem coming down from God out of Heaven among you; and one of you saying that one Form should knock out another till Christ come, etc. I am come in the Spirit of Love, with

> meekness and fear, to give an account of the hope that is in me, to my owne Country first, where I hold forth nothing but the new Jerusalem, in which God shall gather all the Saints first, even those who look for his coming; in which he will so appear in power and glory, dwelling in the midst of them, that many Nations will joyne to the Lord in that day; and these Northern Nations, I believe to be the first fruits of the world; for the Nations of them that are saved, shall walk in the light of the new Jerusalem, and men shall dwell in it, and there shall be no more destructions, but Jerusalem shall be safely inhabited ... this new Jerusalem being the third dispensation differing from the Law and Gospel-Churches, yet comprehending both, as the glory of the Gospel was above that of the Law, and darkened the light therefore, even as the rising Sun doth the Moon when it shines at the full.[43]

What is especially interesting is to see how, under the stimulus of revolution, Jerusalem and Babylon develop from religious symbols – which they had always been – into social and political symbols. This is already well marked in a sermon attributed to the Baptist Hanserd Knollys:

> Babylon's falling is Sion's raising. Babylon's destruction is Jerusalem's salvation ... It is the work of the day to cry down Babylon, that it may fall more and more; and it is the work of the day to give God no rest till he sets up Jerusalem as the praise of the whole world. Blessed is he that dasheth the brats of Babylon against the stones. Blessed is he that hath any hand in pulling down Babylon ...
>
> God uses the common people and the multitude to proclaim that the Lord God omnipotent reigneth. As when Christ came at first the poor received the Gospel – not many wise, not many noble, not many rich, but the poor – so in the reformation of religion, after Antichrist began to be discovered, it was the common people that first came to look after Christ.[44]

Later, Richard Blome complains of the Anabaptists, using the term loosely to characterise all the advanced sects, that:

> Babylon they would overthrow; and within Babylon, they included all Magistracy and civil Government, and all wealth and greatness; A great quarrel they had with the Babylonian Gold.[45]

Just so Edwards had complained earlier that the Sectaries were saying:

> That Christ would destroy not only unlawfull Government, but lawful Government, not only the abuse of it, but the use of it; he was destroying both Monarchy and Aristocracy.[46]

And an anonymous (and premature) obituary poem to the Baptist preacher Vavasour Powell began:

> Here Propagation lies, that did aspire,
> Like Phaeton to set the world on fire,
> Cry'd down Order, and the Ministerial Call,
> And thought to give this Government a fall:
> She would have caused the Gentry flock in Swarms,
> To beg relief like Cripples without Armes ...[47]

We are now very close to Blake's portrait of Jesus the Revolutionary, as he appeared to Caiaphas:

> He mock'd the Sabbath, and he mock'd
> The Sabbath's God, and he unlocked
> The Evil Spirits from their Shrines,
> And turn'd Fishermen to Divines....
> He scorn'd Earth's Parents, scorned Earth's God,
> And mock'd the one and the other's rod;
> His Seventy Disciples sent
> Against Religion and Government:
> They by the Sword of Justice fell
> And him their Cruel Murderer tell. (142)

The political implications of Antinomianism are surely clear enough. God exists in man – in all men, and, as Richard Coppin insisted, fully in all men:

> God is all in one, and so in everyone; the same all which is in me, is in thee; the same God which dwels in one dwels in another; and in the same fulness as he is in one, he is in everyone.[48]

If this is so, the poorest and most ignorant men are as likely to read his intentions as the rich and learned. As Blake put it:

> Christ and his Apostles were illiterate men; Caiaphas,
> Pilate and Herod were learned. (825)

For this reason the Antinomian sects of the seventeenth century led the battle for the right of all to preach, against the determination of the Presbyterians and others to preserve the monopoly of the pulpit to the formally ordained and university trained ministers. At a time when revolutionary ideas were constantly finding religious forms, the demand for the freedom of the pulpit was a political demand.

Nor did it stop here. Since God was in all men, or, as others argued, since Christ died for all and not merely for the elect, it seemed to follow that all were entitled to vote and to have a full share in the political life of the nation. It is not by accident that Walwyn and Overton were among the first and most determined defenders of the rights of the Mechanic Preachers, or that the Antinomian sects were the main nursery of the Levellers. The men of the New Model Army who sang:

> The Lord begins to honour us,
> The Saints are marching on;
> The Sword is sharp, the arrows swift
> To destroy Babylon,

were the same men who wore in their hats and treasured in their hearts *The Agreement of the People*

Interest in Jerusalem was not confined to its symbolism. Just as later the utopian socialists tried to set up socialist Utopias, so the Jerusalem enthusiasts tried to hasten the day of the Lord by earthly assistance. In 1650 the Ranter Thomas Tany (Tawney?) announced that he had been commissioned to gather the Jews together in Jerusalem:

> And Jerusalem shall be built in Glory, in her own land, even on her own Foundation, as the lord hath shown mee, though it seeme never so impossible in the Judgement of Men.[49]

Some years later Tany was drowned in a small boat which he had built himself and in which he was attempting to sail to Jerusalem.[50]

Blake himself seems to have believed that England was the original home of the Jews, and two of his friends, William Owen Pughe and William Sharp, were connected with the sect of the British Israelites and with Joanna Southcott, whose writings were also full of Jerusalem symbolism. Through them, he almost certainly met Richard Brothers, who proposed to rebuild Jerusalem in accordance with a plan divinely revealed to him. Sharp tried, unsuccessfully, to enlist Blake into the Southcottian sect.[51] Blake, like many men of wide reading who have had no formal education, tended to be eclectic, but there was a core of good sense in him which rejected this type of extravagance. The positive use which he made of this floating body of ideas may be seen from the Preface *To the Jews* which opens Chapter II of *Jerusalem*.

A practical application of the doctrine of the Everlasting Gospel, of a very different kind, is to be found in the writings of the Ranter Joseph Salmon. After a general statement of the doctrine, explaining how each manifestation was swallowed up in a later and higher one, he proceeds to apply this to the political situation as it was in 1649. God, having destroyed the Monarchy, first manifested himself in the Parliament. Then:

> We see in a short time, he layes aside that glorious show and Idol (the Parliament) and cloathes himself with the Army.[52]

His will now is that the Army lay aside their swords, and cast themselves upon them. God will give victory out of suffering and humility:

> he is coming to make you free to suffer a blessed Freedom, a glorious Liberty, a sufficient recompense for the loss of all outward glories ... when you are become the children of the new birth, you shall be able to play upon the hole of the Aspe, and to dwell with the Cockatrice in his den, oppression and tyranny shall be destroyed before you.[53]

For Salmon, also, Jerusalem is called Liberty.

One more similarity of outlook between Blake and the Ranters deserves attention. Both lived in a revolutionary age, but most of their writings comes from a time when the revolution was in retreat. There is a hint of this even in the passage just quoted from Salmon, which dates from February 1649, when the Levellers were already beginning to feel that they had been outmanoeuvred by Cromwell. But the main period of Ranter activity was from the later part of that year and in 1650, after the crushing of the Levellers in the Burford campaign. Similarly most of Blake's creative life was spent after the crushing of the English Jacobins and after the transformation of the situation in France which followed the death of Robespierre. So in both cases we have a genuine revolutionary ardour tempered by the realisation that victory was to be deferred and might be long in coming. We have already seen how Blake reacted to this situation by retreating into the obscurities of his mythology. Jerusalem, indeed, whatever else it may have meant to him, remained in his mind a democratic republic based on the principle of human brotherhood, as may be seen from a number of references to republicanism and the French Revolution scattered through his later writings. But he was less

and less able to connect the building of Jerusalem with the practical realities of life in a corrupt and Tory-ridden England.

In just the same way Coppe, who defended the Levellers and clearly sympathised with their political aims, can see no human means by which those aims can be reached. Nevertheless, in the Preface to *A Fiery Flying Roll* he speaks of the coming of the new Jerusalem as imminent, but goes on to explain that it will come by the direct intervention of God, that Levelling will not be accomplished by sword or by spade (a reference to the followers of Lilburne and Winstanley respectively), but:

> I the eternall God, the Lord of Hosts, who am that mighty Leveller am comming (yea even at the doores) to Levell in good earnest, to Levell to some purpose, to Levell with a witnesse, to Levell the Hills with the Valleyes, and to lay the Mountaines low.
>
> For Lo I come (saith the Lord) with a vengeance, to levell also all your Honour, Riches etc. to staine the pride of all your Glory, and to bring into contempt all the Honourables (both persons and things) upon the earth. For this Honour, Nobility, Gentility, Propriety, Superfluity etc. hath been ... the cause of all the blood that ever hath been shed, from the blood of the righteous Abell, to the blood of the last Levellers that were shot to death. *And now (as I live saith the Lord) I am come to make inquisition for blood.*[54]

Coppe's despair is reflected in the fact that *A Fiery Flying Roll* appeals to, and speaks in the name of, the lowest strata in society – the slum population of London, not excluding its criminal fringe of beggars, whores and pickpockets. This is true of no other document of its time. He offers the remarkable conception of God the Highwayman (the highest figure in the criminal world) demanding restitution from the rich like some urban Robin Hood:

> Thou hast many bagges of money, and behold I (the Lord) come as a thief in the night, with my sword drawn in my hand, and like a thief as I am – I say deliver your purse, deliver sirrah! deliver or I'll cut thy throat.[55]

Coppe knew that this depressed class could never be a revolutionary force, but he turned to them because he felt instinctively that the middle and lower middle classes, rotted with holiness, could never carry the revolution further. The ease with which Cromwell had routed the Levellers in the Burford campaign was itself a proof of this. In such a situation, victory could only

come by a miracle, in which men might perhaps participate but which they were powerless to initiate. For this reason the Ranters, however admirable their intentions, were entirely ineffective politically and their energy was wasted on crazy extravagances which exposed them to police action and alienated many possible supporters.[56]

Blake was a wiser and a saner man than Coppe, but he too was faced with somewhat the same dilemma. While his deepest hatred was reserved for the ruling class, there is sufficient evidence that he was repelled by the smugness and commercialism of the artisans and tradesmen from among whom the radicals of his day were drawn. Living only in London, he had no means of knowing that a new working class was in process of formation in the industrial north. In any case, it was not till after his death that this new class began to be politically effective. Blake no more than Coppe could see any new class ready to undertake the building of Jerusalem. Therefore he remained a utopian, and could do no more than make the typical utopian appeal to men of sense and good will:

> Let every Christian, as much as in him lies, engage himself openly and publicly before all the World in some mental pursuit for the Building up of Jerusalem. (536)

It is much that in such a situation he never gave up hope, never became embittered, never felt that poverty and neglect was too high a price to pay for the maintenance of his integrity. This is his glory as a man. As a poet, his importance from our point of view is that he came just in time to give the ancient tradition of English Antinomianism its most splendid expression. A generation later that tradition had virtually disappeared and its disappearance has been one of the main reasons for the obscurity which we find in his poetry.

As I said at the outset, Blake is a difficult poet, and no good is done by pretending that he is not. But I think that part of the difficulty has been created by ourselves, through forgetting the tradition in which he wrote. By rediscovering this tradition, and seeing him in relation to it, we do not remove the difficulties, but we do begin to equip ourselves to grapple with them.

Notes

* The figures in brackets are page references to *Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, edited by Geoffrey Keynes.

1. Jacob Bronowski, *A Man Without a Mask*, London 1944, pp. 85–6. Ray Watkinson in his article 'Blake, the Artist and the Man' (*World News*, Vol. IV No. 47, 23 November 1947) denies that engraving was a declining craft. This is probably correct but does not affect the general value of Dr Bronowski's work. My debt to his book will be obvious to everyone.
2. Alexander Gilchrist, *The Life of William Blake*, London 1942 (Everyman's Library), p. 300.
3. Ibid., pp. 301–2.
4. Arthur Symonds, *William Blake*, London 1907, p. 267.
5. *Gangraena*, II, 1646, p. 14.
6. Denis Saurat, *Blake and Milton*, London 1920.
7. Samuel Fisher, *Baby Baptism meer babyism*, 1653, quoted in Rufus M. Jones, *Studies in Mystical Religion*, London 1909, pp. 470–1.
8. William Hepworth Dixon, *Spiritual Wives*, London 1868, vol. 1, pp. 148–9.
9. Robert Barclay, *The Inner Life of the Religious Societies of the Commonwealth*, London 1876, p. 415.
10. Ephraim Pagitt, *Heresiography*, 1645, p. 77.
11. Richard Heath, *The English Peasant*, London 1893, p. 371.
12. *Gangraena*, I, p. 22.
13. Ibid., I, p. 28.
14. *Gangraena*, I, pp. 22 and 34; Pagitt, *Heresiography*, p. 77; Gerrard Winstanley, *Truth Lifting up its Head above Scandals* (Sabine (ed.),' *Collected Works of Winstanley*, p. 122; Coppe, *A Fiery Flying Roll*, 1650, Preface; Richard Huberthorne etc., *The Testimony of the Everlasting Gospel Witnessed through Suffering*, 1654.
15. John Holland, *The Smoke of the Bottomless Pit*, 1651, p. 1.
16. Ibid., p. 2.
17. Ibid., p. 4.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid., p. 6.
20. Ibid.
21. Anthony Wood, *Athenae Oxoniensis*, 1692, vol. II, p. 367.
22. Tobias Crisp, *Christ Alone Exalted*, 1643, Sermon II, p. 39. This work was reprinted in 1691, when it attracted considerable attention in Dissenting circles.
23. *Fiery Flying Roll*, Preface, p. 1.
24. Ibid., pp. 2–3.
25. Coppe, Preface to Richard Coppin, *Divine Teachings*, 1649.
26. *Fiery Flying Roll*, Part II, Ch. 8.
27. Roger Crab, *Dagon's Downfall*, 1657, p. 4.
28. *Gangraena*, II, p. 146.

29. Richard Coppin, *Truth's Testimony*, 1653, p. 31.
30. The Muggletonians were sufficiently flourishing in 1820 to bring out an expensively produced edition of the *Collected Works of Reeves and Muggleton* in three volumes.
31. Ludowick Muggleton, *The Acts of the Witnesses of the Spirit*, 1699, Part III, Ch. 11. A posthumous work.
32. Swedenborg announced that the third age of the spirit was to begin in 1757. It is to this that Blake refers, half humorously, in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: 'As a new heaven is begun, and it is now thirty-three years since its advent, the Eternal Hell revives. And lo! Swedenborg is the Angel sitting by the tomb.' Blake, undoubtedly, was entertained by the thought that this was the year of his own birth. On Blake and Swedenborg, see J.G. Davies, *The Theology of William Blake*, London 1948.
33. *Fiery Flying Roll*, Part I, p. 2.
34. Ibid., Part II, p. 2.
35. Gilchrist op. cit., p. 97. The truth of this story, which both puzzled and shocked Blake's nineteenth-century admirers, has been denied. But the evidence in its favour seems to me much better than that against it. Butts was one of Blake's oldest and steadiest friends, the last man to invent or circulate such a tale if it were untrue. Linnell and Palmer, who denied it, were certainly close friends, but did not meet Blake till about twenty years later, and their denials seem to have had little more basis than that it did not squarte with their estimate of his character.
36. Wood, op. cit., vol. III, p. 367.
37. *A Remonstrance ... of Abiezer Cope*, 1651, p. 6.
38. See *The Ranters Declaration*, 1650, *The Routing of the Ranters*, 1650, Laurence Clarkson, *The Lost Sheep Found*, 1660, p. 28. Compare Engels: 'It is a curious fact that with every great revolutionary movement the question of "Free love" comes into the foreground. With one set of people as a revolutionary progress, as a shaking off of old traditional fetters, no longer necessary; with others as a welcome doctrine, comfortably covering all sorts of free and easy practices between man and woman.' (*The Book of Revelation* in *Marx and Engels on Religion*, 1957, p. 205.) Blake, clearly, comes into the first category; both were to be found among the Ranters.
39. *Gangraena*, II, p. 24.
40. Gilchrist, op. cit., p. 97.
41. G.H., *The Declaration of John Robbins*, 1651, p. 5.
42. *The Ranters Religion*, 1650, p. 8.
43. William Erbery, *A Call to the Churches*, 1653, pp. 35–7.
44. *A Glimpse of Sions Glory*, 1641, quoted in A.S.P. Woodhouse, *Puritanism and Liberty*, London 1938, pp. 233–4.
45. Richard Blome, *The Fanatick History*, 1660, p. 19.
46. *Gangraena*, I, p. 9.
47. Quoted in William York Tindall, *John Bunyan Mechanick Preacher*, London 1934, p. 10. The 'epitaph' was written in 1654, but Powell died in Lambeth prison in 1670.
48. Coppin, *Divine Teachings*, p. 8.
49. *I Proclaim the Return of the Jews*, 1650, broadsheet.

50. Alexander Gordon, *The Origin of the Muggletonians*, London 1865, p. 24.
51. Ruthven Todd, *Tracks in the Snow*, London 1946, pp. 54–5.
52. *A Rout, A Rout: Or Some Part of the Armies Quarters Beaten Up*, 1649, p. 3.
53. Ibid., p. 11.
54. *Fiery Flying Roll*, Part I, p. 4.
55. Ibid., Part II, p. 2.
56. The discredit into which the Ranters fell was perhaps one reason for the success of the Quakers, who enrolled a number of former Ranters, and, at the beginning, resembled them much more closely than they are now ready to admit.

Genius on the Border

Charlotte Brontë 1816–55: Emily Brontë 1818–48: Anne Brontë 1820–49

I

The centenary of the death of Charlotte Brontë takes place at a time when her reputation stands well above that of most of the novelists of her period, while her sister Emily, almost unknown during her life, is now universally regarded as a poet of outstanding quality and as the author of one of the handful of English novels of absolutely the first order. Even Anne, the youngest sister, though her talents were slighter, produced two novels which are still deservedly read for their simplicity and candour. This is, therefore, a convenient opportunity to try to see the significance of the Brontë family and to try to place them in due relation to their age and environment. If genius, in one sense, cannot be explained in such a way, it is often possible to understand its form and direction, to discovery why a certain woman, born in a certain time, place and class, should have written *Wuthering Heights* or *Jane Eyre* rather than *Middlemarch* or *Wives and Daughters*.

Much has been written to little purpose about the 'miracle' of the Brontës, but, if there is one thing which it is tempting to regard as miraculous it is the very fact of their being reared in a West Riding parsonage at all. Yet this was something that was never allowed to escape to the surface of their minds: the one thing

which could never be mentioned was the fact that the Revd Patrick Brontë, perpetual curate of Haworth, had once been Pat Brunty, a barefoot peasant boy running around a poor cabin in the County Down. Mr Brontë was, naturally, reticent about his early years, but we do know that he took the English side during the great Irish rising of 1798, and that a few years later – aged twenty-five – he came to England and was able to enter St John's College, Cambridge, and prepare for the church. It is only speculation, but perhaps not unjustifiable, to think that he may have found his own country uncomfortable, and that the help he must have had to enable him to go to the university may have been in the nature of a reward for his attitude in 1798.

In any case, he appeared in England as a staunch Tory and Protestant – both of which he remained all his life. Mrs Gaskell, in her famous *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, records the fact, of which much has been made, that he became unpopular among the workers because of his uncompromising opposition to the Luddites, and then adopted the custom, which he never abandoned, of carrying a loaded pistol. But this is by no means all that we know of his public life, and the commonly accepted picture needs considerable modification. Mrs Gaskell, having recorded the Luddite episode, goes on to say:

> Many years later, during his residence at Haworth, there was a strike; the hands in the neighbourhood felt themselves aggrieved by their masters and refused to work; Mr Brontë thought that they had been unfairly and unjustly treated, and he assisted them by all the means in his power to 'keep the wolf from the doors', and avoid the incubus of debt. Several of the more influential inhabitants of Haworth and the neighbourhood were mill-owners; they remonstrated pretty sharply with him, but he believed that his conduct was right and persevered in it.

It may safely be said that clergy of the established church who were bold enough to face the disapproval of their richer parishioners by supporting strikers were rather less numerous a century ago than they are today.

Mrs Gaskell tells us later that he carried on an agitation for a proper water supply for Haworth 'instead of the weary, hardworking housewives having to carry every bucketful for a distance of several hundred yards up a steep street. But he was baffled by the ratepayers.' 'Ratepayers', as we know, is a common

euphemism for the richer inhabitants of a neighbourhood. Finally, we learn from another source that, while a curate at Dewsbury, he was active in the defence of a young man falsely accused of desertion from the army.

His daughters may have inherited his Toryism: they certainly inherited also his fine sense of justice and the courage which made him follow inflexibly the path along which that sense of justice seemed to point. And Toryism, in the complex class relations of the early nineteenth century, could assume many forms, from the brutally repressive creed of Eldon and Castlereagh, through the paternalism of Shaftesbury to the almost ferocious Tory Radicalism of Sadler, Oastler and J.R. Stephens. Stephens indeed, with his vision of a society based on Altar, Throne and Cottage, was capable of a violence of language that none of the genuine revolutionaries of the age could outdo.

There is nothing to suggest that Mr Brontë's Toryism was quite of this type, yet it is clear that while his attitude to the Luddites shows a conviction that the workers should be kept in their place, he did not regard that place as necessarily the one which their employers allotted to them, all the more as these employers were probably Whigs. Beyond this he did not go, but for Charlotte and Emily this was a starting point, and his view was probably very close to that expressed by Charlotte in *Shirley*:

> Every human being has his share of rights. I suspect it would conduce to the happiness and welfare of all, if each knew his allotment, and held to it as tenaciously as the martyr to his creed.

About Charlotte's social and political ideas we know a certain amount from *Shirley* and from her many letters: about Emily's we know almost nothing directly, though there are hints such as that contained in a letter from Charlotte to W.S. Williams:

> In some points I consider Ellis [Emily] somewhat of a theorist: now and then he broaches ideas which strike my sense as much more daring and original than practical; his reason may be in advance of mine, but certainly it often travels a different road.

The note of caution, almost alarm, here, is all the more remarkable since Williams was a Radical and Republican, to whom 'advanced' views would hardly be alarming.

One thing is clear: from their earliest years the Brontë children

were exceptionally alive to the world about them. They read and talked precociously, and of politics as much as of anything else. We know, for example, that the *Leeds Mercury* was taken at the Haworth parsonage in 1830 when it published a long letter from Richard Oastler which opened his campaign against the horrors of child labour in the worsted factories. Haworth lay in the worsted area and it is long odds that Charlotte, then fourteen, read and discussed this letter. David Wilson, in his article 'Emily Brontë: First of the Moderns' rightly stresses the fact that Haworth was not a quiet backwater but a rapidly growing industrial township and a part of one of the main industrial centres of Britain.[1]

Charlotte Brontë, the oldest of the family to survive childhood, was born in 1816; Anne, the youngest, in 1820. They grew up, therefore, in the second, and in many ways the most important, phase of the Industrial Revolution. It was not the age of the primary inventions, of the first introduction of power-driven machinery and of the factory system, but rather of the consolidation and victory of that system, of the development of full-scale capitalism with its accompanying cycle of boom and slump and of intense and continuous class conflict. Early in the century came the Luddite riots: there followed in succession the Radical agitation of the Peterloo period, the struggle around the Reform Bill of 1832, the growth of trade unionism in the early 1830s, the fight for improved factory conditions and against the Poor Law of 1834, and, finally, the Chartist movement from 1838 to 1848. In every one of these the West Riding was a storm centre.

So we have four perceptive children, Charlotte, Branwell, Emily and Anne, growing up in a robust, swiftly-changing world. Their early life coincided almost exactly with the period of the most rapid growth of Haworth's population – from 3,971 in 1811 to 5,835 in 1831. During most of this time they were at home, learning something from their father and aunt (their mother was dead) and a great deal from each other. In time they evolved an extraordinary fantasy world, or rather, two such worlds, since quite early Charlotte and Bramwell established a claim to Angria while Emily, followed by Anne, seceded to their own world of Gondal. Similar on the surface, both being full of war, intrigue and wild passions and crimes, the two worlds were in reality very different. Angria was Byronic-escapist, Gondal ballad-heroic, so that while Charlotte's fantasy life coloured all her work at one

remove, often to its detriment, Emily's greatest poems were nearly all Gondal, and there is reason to think that *Wuthering Heights*, for all its Yorkshire setting, is in essence a Gondal tale.

This combination of an extraordinarily intense interest in the stirring external world, and an extraordinarily intense fantasy life, must be stressed because it is the first of the contradictions which went to shape the Brontë genius. But it is only the first.

I have spoken of the industrial character of Haworth. Yet many writers from Mrs Gaskell onwards have stressed the wildness and isolation of the Brontë environment. The truth lies not between but in the fusion of these views. Though Haworth is a part of the West Riding textile area, it lies upon its extreme edge. To the east and south-east are Bradford and Halifax, to the west nothing but moors that even today are empty and barren. And the parsonage, at the top of the township, is on the very frontier, so that a turn to right or left from its door would take the Brontë children immediately into one of two quite different worlds.

They lived thus on a frontier: geographically as well as in time, since in their own lives this region was being transformed. Two worlds called to them, the old world of the ballad north on the moor, the new world of capitalist construction, and proletarian struggle, in the already thickly populated valleys. The important thing, perhaps, is that each of these worlds was, in its own way, a heroic world which could attract a generous and lively imagination. One of the things to which their work owes its peculiar quality is their response to this challenge and contradiction. In *Wuthering Heights*, above all, Emily achieved a complete synthesis between the world of industrial struggle and the ballad world.

Culturally, too, they found a similar contradiction. They were reared in a house where Dr Johnson was regarded as the unqualified master of English prose, but also in the great age of Byronism, of extravagant romanticism and wild poetry. So the Duke of Wellington, that outstanding relic of the age of reason, was converted into a Byronic hero in the person of his fictitious son Zamorna.

Finally, in this connection, the Brontës were on the frontier by reason of their ambiguous class position. I have referred to Mr Brontë's irish origins. This had been left behind, but what exactly had been achieved? As a beneficed clergyman of the established

church he was, of course, technically a gentleman, but a clergyman with a large family, a small living and no influence was on the very margin of gentility. The bare subsistence of the family depended on his life and health (Charlotte rarely wrote a letter without its little bulletin on 'Papa's health') and so Branwell had to seek a subordinate position as a railway clerk and the girls to become governesses, treated as inferiors by coarse, newly-enriched manufacturers or illiterate squireens whom they, with their cultural and intellectual standards, despised. And the governess of this time, the one member of the household who was neither servant nor one of the family, was in a pre-eminently frontier position. Above all, the governess was *alone*.

Only too often, a frontier is a battleground. Those who live there must be prepared to fight or go down. Branwell failed to fight. Charlotte, Emily and Anne fought implacably all their lives and the record of their fight is in their work.

II

Charlotte's first novel, after she had abandoned her Angrian fantasy world, *The Professor*, was of a kind new in England, a novel written from below, not of course from a proletarian standpoint – that was not possible, but from that of someone forced to fight for the mere right to exist. As she said in her preface:

> I said to myself that my hero should work his way through life as I had seen real living men work their way through theirs – that he should never get a shilling he had not earned – that no sudden turn should lift him in a moment to wealth and high station.

Because she saw the world from inside and underneath, her work often has a chaotic character, as if we had a plum's eye view of a pie. But she is able to give us a vision of the true nature of pie which we could get in no other way. A good example of her method is the account of Sunday at Lowood School:

> At the close of the afternoon service we returned by an exposed and hilly road, where the bitter winter wind, blowing over a range of snowy summits to the north, almost flayed the skin from our faces ...
>
> How we longed for the heat and light of a blazing fire when we got back! But, to the little ones at least, this was denied: each hearth was

> immediately surrounded by a double row of great girls, and behind them the younger children crouched in groups, wrapping their starved arms in their pinafores.

In all her work, Charlotte put the case of the individual against the world, the poor, the friendless, the unprivileged. In *The Professor* she puts it coldly and objectively, in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, passionately. All her heroines are forced to fight for the right to exist. Because the Brontës were isolated on their frontier, neither workers, nor, in a real sense, gentlefolk, the fight is always an individual fight for personal and isolated ends, for a place in society, to preserve their integrity, for the rights of the heart. This was inevitable in the circumstances. Isolation and suffering developed their sense of the power of the fate by which they felt themselves doomed. This is why they took Cowper's poem *The Castaway* as a statement of their own case:

> No voice divine the storm allay'd,
> No light propitious shone;
> When, snatch'd from all effectual aid,
> We perish'd each alone:
> But I beneath a rougher sea,
> And whelm'd in deeper gulphs than he.

Their quality was shown in the courage with which they faced their fate, in their unending battle and in the frankness with which they recorded it.

Charlotte's novels use shock tactics, carrying us away despite reason and judgement. It may have been this which contemporary critics resented, seeing here, in work obviously feminine, an abandonment of the negative role which the age assigned to women. For the first time in England, a writer asserts with power that women have lives that are an end *in themselves*, and not only as the complement of the lives of a series of men – fathers, brothers, husbands and son. Yet Charlotte was never bold enough to carry this idea through to the end: if she had been, critics might not have dared to attack her as they did. And it was this shrinking at the last which made Mary Taylor, who loved her the most discerningly of all her friends, cry out on her, 'You are a coward and a traitor,' because she did not maintain with Mary's fearless logic the thesis that neither creed, race nor sex had anything to do with the final value of the human spirit. Yet Charlotte was neither

a coward nor a traitor – she arrived at her truth by a different road from Mary, and in the implicit feeling of her novels goes much further along the road than her conventional Victorian consciousness would ever admit. She was supremely equalitarian for all her little snobbishnesses, and that is why the *Quarterly Review* cannot be entirely derided for finding in *Jane Eyre* the smell of Chartism, writing:

> Altogether the autobiography of Jane Eyre is pre-eminently an anti-Christian composition. There is throughout a murmuring against the comforts of the rich and the privations of the poor, which, so far as each individual is concerned, is a murmuring against God's appointment. There is a proud and perpetual asserting of the rights of man for which we find no authority in God's word or in his Providence. There is that pervading tone of ungodly discontent which is at once the most prominent and the most subtle evil which the law and the pulpit, which all civilised society has, in fact, at the present day to contend with. We do not hesitate to say that the tone of mind and thought which has overthrown authority and violated every code – human and divine – abroad, and fostered Chartism and rebellion at home, is the same which has written *Jane Eyre*.

– adding delicately that the author 'must be one who for some sufficient reason has long forfeited the society of her sex'.

Charlotte resented this criticism, but her complaint was always at the charge of unwomanliness rather than of Chartism, and it is interesting that she was delighted with a review written by Sydney Dobell which spoke of 'the youthful ambiguity of her politics' and 'the unmistakable hatred of oppression and determination to be free'. Charlotte was not a radical, still less a revolutionary: there is nothing to suggest that she sympathised with the aims of the Luddites or the Chartists. But she not only pitied the sufferings of the masses – these sufferings made her angry because she saw that they were man-made and avoidable.

And she was far more open minded, both in religion and politics, than is often supposed. For a Tory and churchwoman her friends were a remarkably mixed lot, including the republican Taylors, from whom the Yorke family in *Shirley* were drawn, W.S. Williams, an old member of the radical group which had included Leigh Hunt and Keats, the unitarian Mrs Gaskell, and the freethinking Miss Martineau. Her letters often show a keen realism when discussing political affairs, as when she wrote to Williams in March 1848:

> Are the London republicans, and *you* amongst the number, cooled down yet? I suppose not, because your French brethren are acting very nobly. The abolition of slavery and of the punishment of death for political offences are two glorious deeds, but how will they get over the question of the organisation of Labour! Surely this will be the sand-bank on which the vessel will run aground if they don't mind.

Yet Charlotte found it difficult to sympathise with a revolution in France because of her firm persuasion that the French were by nature clever, immoral and superficial:

> With the French and Irish I have no sympathy. With the Germans and Italians I think the case is different – as different as the love of freedom is from the lust of license.

III

Her social ideas, both positive and negative, can perhaps best be studied in *Shirley*. In *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* Charlotte presented herself and her own case – suitably disguised.[2] In *Shirley* she presented the rest of the Brontë family and the outside world as objectively as she was able. It is this wider objective and its partial success which makes *Shirley* perhaps the least successful but the most interesting of her novels. She began, I think, with the intention of telling a plain tale of Yorkshire life, 'as unromantic as a Monday morning', but her work was interrupted by the death of Emily (December 1848) and thereafter her dead sister took fuller and fuller possession of the book as Charlotte tried to give her all the things she was denied by life. (It is characteristic that she never here, any more than in life, stopped to ask if they were the things Emily *wanted*.) In the same way, but to a lesser degree, Anne became increasingly identified with Caroline Helstone, while there was far more of Mr Brontë in the Revd Helstone, that 'clerical Cossack', than could ever be admitted. For the rest, the book is crammed with scarcely diguised portraits of friends and neighbours.

The result is a patchwork, with a lumbering, over-elaborate plot, perhaps partly the result of Charlotte's anxiety to please and give good value. And in *Shirley* her great weakness is most apparent. It is evident from her comments on Jane Austen and from her introduction to *Wuthering Heights* that she was the inhabitant of a sort of half-world, a limbo between prose and

poetry, with a foot in each yet seldom quite at home in either. As a result she was never able to enjoy the unqualified mastery which Jane Austen and Emily enjoy in their respective worlds, and at her worst she falls into bathos, into language which is neither prose nor poetry but rhetoric. In *Shirley*, when she is not writing with the intensity and passion she attains in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, rhetoric trying to be poetry is all too common.

Yet this ambiguous status, within limits, was also a source of strength: living and working, once more, on a frontier, she was able at times to link the two worlds, and in *Shirley* she compensated for her frequent lapses by succeeding in this respect to a greater extent than anywhere else. And the strength of *Shirley* lies, above all, in its firm and delicate understanding and statement of the class relations of an observed society.

On the face of it, *Shirley* is an historical novel, a story of the Luddite riots that took place before Charlotte was born. But this is only part of the truth. Dr H. Heaton in *The Economic Background of 'Shirley'* writes:

> I am informed that Charlotte wanted to use the Chartist Movement as her background, but was told that the events of that agitation were too near and burning to be fit for treatment; she therefore took the Luddite riots, and was able to draw her material from the recollections of her father and others who had been at close quarters with the dark doings of 1811–12.

Charlotte was at school near Halifax, and, later, teaching at Dewsbury, during much of the period of the Reform Bill agitation, the Poor Law struggles and the opening phase of Chartism. Halifax, Chartist stronghold, was also the scene of one of the most notable Poor Law riots: Hartshead Moor, only a few miles away and the place of Mr Brontë's second Yorkshire curacy, was the scene in 1838 of one of the greatest Chartist torchlight rallies. It must have been events such as these which reminded Charlotte and her friends of the earlier Luddite days. And, finally, it was early in 1848, at the time of the last great Chartist revival, that she began work on *Shirley* itself. It is clear that while the details of the book may have been historical, the feeling and atmosphere were taken at least as much from what Charlotte had seen for herself in her most impressionable years.

Similarly, when she writes about the factory children, she must

have had in mind the contemporary exposures of Oastler in his campaign against 'Yorkshire slavery' in the worsted mills:

> The mill windows were alight, the bell still rung loud, and now the little children came running in, in too great a hurry, let us hope, to feel much nipped by the inclement air ... Mr Moore stood at the entrance to watch them as they went by; to those who came rather late he said a word of reprimand, which was more sharply repeated by Joe Scott when the lingerers reached the work-rooms. Neither master nor overlooker spoke savagely; they were not savage men either of them, though it appeared they were rigid, for they fined a delinquent who came considerably too late ...
>
> Child-torturers, slave-masters and drivers I consign to the hands of jailers; the novelist may be excused from sullying his pages with their deeds ... I am happy to be able to inform my readers that neither Mr Moore nor his overlooker ever struck a child in their mill.
>
> It was eight o'clock ... the signal was given for breakfast; the children, released for half an hour from toil, betook themselves to the small baskets which contained their allowance of bread. Let us hope they had enough to eat; it would be a pity were it otherwise.

The whole passage is written with a deceptive quiet, but the feelings of bitterness cannot be mistaken. Charlotte knew, and wanted her readers to be aware that she knew, that thousands of children in her own neighbourhood were overworked, underfed and often brutally ill-used. She makes it clear that Moore's humanity was *exceptional*, but that even in this exceptional case things were far from well. She knew precisely the character of the bourgeoisie:

> Tradesmen, when they speak against war, always profess to hate it because it is a bloody and barbarous proceeding; you would think, to hear them talk, that they are peculiarly civilised – exceptionally gentle and kindly of dispostion to their fellow-men. This is not the case. Many are extremely narrow and cold-hearted, have no good feeling for any class but their own, are distant – even hostile to all others; call them useless; seem to question their right to exist; seem to grudge them the very air they breathe, and to think the circumstance of their eating, drinking and living in decent houses quite unjustifiable.

Her language may be more temperate than that of Kingsley, or even Mrs Gaskell, but her condemnation is, if anything, more absolute.

IV

Charlotte's views on almost everything are preserved in hundreds of her letters: what Emily thought has to be deduced from her poems and from *Wuthering Heights*: no easy task. Her sole recorded direct utterance is in a letter from Mary Taylor to Mrs. Gaskell, and that is really no more than a characteristic refusal to commit herself:

> One time I mentioned that someone asked me what religion I was of (with a view to getting me as a partisan) and that I had said that was between God and me. Emily (who was lying on the hearth-rug) exclaimed, 'That's right!'

A further difficulty is created by the fact that almost all her poems are dramatic, that is to say, are attributed to one or another of the characters in the great Gondal cycle. Many imaginative children create fantasy worlds, sometimes in great detail, but Emily is unique, I think, in being the only great creative writer who never abandoned her fantasy but made it the vehicle for her mature work. Fantasy for her was not an escape but a gateway into reality.

Gondal was a huge island lying somewhere in the North Pacific, bleak, mountainous and rough, very similar in climate and scenery to the Pennine region as Emily knew it, and divided among a number of warring principalities. Later the Gondals conquered and colonised Gaaldine, a luxuriant and tropical land far to the south. They carried their feuds with them, and the exploitation of Gaaldine produced endless wars, and unnatural conflicts which returned to plague Gondal itself. It is tempting to think that Emily saw here something of the nemesis of imperialism. As she matured these conflicts assumed an increasingly social character: Emily seems to become obsesesed with a King versus People theme, an inner conflict between the claims of loyalty and liberty which may well reflect a conflict between her family toryism and a growing realisation of the fact of oppression. Two long poems written towards the end of her life, in 1845–46, relate to the republican-royalist wars in Gondal. It is worth asking, if this is a positive reaction to Chartism, even though we do not have the evidence to answer this question. Miss F.E. Ratchford comments:

> The literary career that began in revolt against Branwell's pointless battles [in the Angrian fantasy-world which he shared with Charlotte] ended in denunciation of wars in general as senseless and debasing.

Yet these poems have a personal and passionate intensity which is often baffling: they are dramatic but it is hard to regard them as anything but a direct expression, in some sense, of Emily's own experience. Perhaps the Gondal form served her for the same purpose as the mask which Mr Brontë once placed on the faces of his children when asking them questions they might otherwise have been constrained in answering – they gave her a boldness of utterance based on a sense of anonymity. This was surely a part of another shared Brontë contradiction, desire for fame struggling with a desire to escape notice, and the pseudonyms of Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell, under which their work was published, were masks of the same order.

Virginia Moore points out that the people of the Gondal myth were *heroes* and that this was Emily's release into the heroic: 'Emily is up to her old trick of enlarging the world.' This is true, but in *Wuthering Heights* she discovers a new 'trick' of seeing the world as it is, not enlarged, and still discerning the heroic in it. This is the difference between the Gondal world and that of the ballads, for though the Gondal poems have many ballad qualities they are 'Scottified' and the outline weakened, like an over-enlarged photograph (or like *Ossian*). But in *Wuthering Heights* as in the ballads the outline remains clear and sharp and the heroism is therefore this-worldly. It is perhaps nearer to Clark Saunders than to anything else in the language.

Its theme is the conflict of two societies, the bleak, upland society of Wuthering Heights, of Heathcliff and Catherine, of struggle and endurance, and the rich, comfortable lowland society of Thrushcross Grange, of the Lintons and of secure enjoyment. The conflict is *real* but it can be resolved, and once the gulf has been bridged a new creation is possible in which both have a part. This is expressed symbolically in the persons and relationships of the younger Catherine and Hareton, but it cannot happen till the first world, in the person of Heathcliff, has the power to destroy the other. Once he has this power, the will to destroy vanishes and the creative synthesis can take place.

I think that *Wuthering Heights*, as work in general, can best be understood in relation to that of Blake, her closest parallel in

English literature. What has seemed to many the mysticism of both Emily Brontë and Blake is really their dialectical method of thought. They both see the world in terms of the conflict of opposites and its resolution, and this is the theme of *Wuthering Heights*.

Wuthering Heights cannot be understood if it is read as a moral tale, a conventional novel with hero and villain, in which the good are to be approved and the wicked condemned. Heathcliff and Cathy sin – according to the world's judgement – and Emily accepts this judgement as valid, at least consciously, but she sees and insists that there is another standard by which their conduct is not only inevitable but right. Like Blake, she has the ability to live on two planes (or planets!) at the same time. She does not condemn the standards of Nelly Dean, or of Charlotte, any more than she condemns those of Heathcliff – she merely insists that they are different and can only be reconciled after an inner harmony has been achieved. This harmony corresponds *in quality* to the social synthesis of a classless society. The way to it is not by submitting the passion and loyalty of the heart to the government of reason, but by following them to the end till they themselves attain reason. So Blake wrote, 'If the fool would persist in his folly he would become wise', and Emily,

> I'll walk where my own nature will be leading:
> It vexes me to choose another guide.

David Wilson suggests that in *Wuthering Heights* Heathcliff, and to some extent Catherine, symbolise the working class, and there is a sense in which this may be true. What I think certainly true is that in this novel personal relations are raised to a peculiar level of intensity by which their individual character is transcended. Emily does not *substitute* social for personal relations, but raises all human relations to a level at which they acquire a social and universal significance. For her, love is not the purely personal emotion it remains for most novelists, but something akin to solidarity, like the force which binds members of a clan – or a class. This is to say that she does not look at human relations in a bourgeois way at all. This is how Catherine speaks of Heathcliff:

> I have no more business to marry Edgar Linton than I have to be in heaven; and if that wicked man had not brought Heathcliff so low, I wouldn't have thought of it. It would degrade me to marry Heathcliff

> now; and that, not because he's handsome, Nelly, but because he's more myself than I am. Whatever our souls are made of his and mine are the same, and Linton's is as different as a moonbeam from lightning, or frost from fire ...
>
> My great miseries in this world have been Heathcliff's miseries, and I have watched and felt each from the beginning ... my love for Heathcliff resembles the eternal rocks beneath – a source of little visible delight, but necessary.

Catherine's betrayal of Heathcliff is a self-betrayal, and from it the tragedy of *Wuthering Heights* proceeds.

V

In *Wuthering Heights* Emily parted from the main literary stream of her age. Charlotte's work, even at its best, was weakened because she wrote within a romantic tradition that was, by the mid-nineteenth century, degenerate, unreal, florid and, in the contemporary sense, Gothic. This degenerate romanticism resulted in a loss of form, and Charlotte's novels are badly and loosely constructed. What saves them is the depth and truth of their feeling, which overcomes all the handicaps imposed by a false convention, and the energy which transmits itself to the reader.

Emily was saved from many difficulties because, like Blake, she was immunised from all current moral and social fashions and not only stood outside all coteries but was actually unaware of their existence. Consequently, her genius was able to follow its own line, without being distorted by the pressure of contemporary conceptions. *Wuthering Heights* is, in the first place, what was extremely rare in England during this period, a technical triumph, a novel constructed on an unusual but almost flawless pattern. But it was more than this, it entirely escaped from the degenerate romanticism in which Emily had been brought up and with which many of her poems are still coloured. In *Wuthering Heights* she triumphed because she was able to grasp and accept the universe as a whole. Yet her acceptance was not passive, it had nothing in common with acquiescence. Rather, she was able so to use, master and transform her experience that acceptance became a critical weapon. Setting her tale in the simplified, pre-industrial world of the ballad north, she uses its standards to express her profoundest convictions about life in her own time.

Yet, when all has been said about Emily's uniqe quality, and the differences between her genius and Charlotte's in particular, it is necessary to stress their underlying kinship. Some enthusiasts, in their anxiety to prove that Emily was a swan, which she certainly was, having felt it necessary to prove that the rest of her family were geese, which Charlotte most certainly was not. And their kinship can easily be demonstrated by one small example.

After Emily's death Charlotte edited a selection of her poems and included, under the title *The Visionary*, three stanzas from a longer poem. And, to make this a poem complete in itself, she added two more stanzas of her own. Not only did these pass unchallenged as Emily's, till they were shown from an examination of the manuscripts to be by Charlotte, but they have more than once been quoted as peculiarly characteristic of Emily by critics who have stressed the differences between herself and Charlotte.[3]

Today, a century after Charlotte's death, we begin perhaps to have a truer picture of their relative positions. The early neglect of Emily, the more recent denigration of Charlotte, are now past, and we see them (and, for that matter, Anne) as branches of the same tree, springing from the same environment and fighting the same untiring battle with adverse circumstances, a battle in which they became, perhaps unintentionally, the representatives of many thousands of the unhappy and the oppressed. Their weapons and powers were different, but their battle and their courage were the same. It is for this courage that they are still loved and honoured by countless men and women who do not think of them primarily as literary figures but as kindred spirits travelling the same road.

Notes

1. This brilliant article, which appeared in *The Modern Quarterly Miscellany*, London 1947, describes in more detail than I have space for the West Riding background of the Brontës. It has been of the greatest value to me, though I quite often venture to dissent from Mr Wilson's conclusions.
2. It is noteworthy that only in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* does she write as a woman. *Shirley* is written in the third person, *The Professor* and the early Angrian romances in the first persons, but as a man.
3. Notably by Mr Charles Morgan.

Parson Lot

On 12 April 1848, two days after the Chartist meeting on Kennington Common, a remarkable proclamation appeared upon the hoardings of London.

> WORKMEN OF ENGLAND [it began] You say that you are wronged. Many of you are wronged; and many besides yourselves know it. Almost all men who have heads and hearts know it – above all the working clergy know it.

It went on to discuss the workers' just demands for freedom, asked if they believed the Charter would give it to them, and ended, somewhat unhelpfully, 'Workers of England be wise, and then you will be free, for you will be fit to be free.'

This manifesto was the work of Charles Kingsley, clergyman, poet and novelist, and forms the first chapter of the curious history of the Christian Socialist movement in England. It is a movement easily enough dismissed, a combination of the typical feudal socialism of which Marx had written only a few months before:

> half lamentation, half lampoon; half echo of the past, half menace of the future; at times, by its bitter, witty and incisive criticism, striking the bourgeoisie to the very hearts' core, but always ludicrous in its effect, through total incapacity to comprehend the march of modern history,

with the typical petty-bourgeois socialism which

> aspires either to restoring the old means of production and exchange, and with them the old property relations and the old society, or to cramping the modern means of production within the framework of the old property relations.

With the correctness or applicability of Marx's objective analysis few of us are likely to quarrel, but when we have said this, have we said all that need be said? And, further, this having been said, are

we entitled to draw the conclusion, as Theodore Rothstein appears to do, that the work of Kingsley and his friends was a clever and insidious device, that, 'they upbraided the rich to gain the confidence of the poor' with the object of detaching the workers from political action? I do not think so, nor do I think that any study of Kingsley in his life and writings lends support to any such conception of deliberate craft.

Faults he had in plenty. He was insular, snobbish, opinionated and at times hysterical, but these are not the characteristic failings of the crafty man. Confused and self-contradictory he certainly was, and totally incapable of comprehending the march of modern history, for all that he ended his days as its Regius Professor at Cambridge, yet he stands out as a man of great courage and transparent honesty, and I do not believe that his effect, or that of his group, on the working-class movement was wholly or indeed mainly harmful.

The son of a Church of England clergyman, Kingsley was in 1848 Rector of Eversley in Hampshire and his concern over social questions had already brought him into touch with a group of young men who had gathered round the Revd F.D. Maurice, and which included also J.M. Ludlow, Thomas Hughes and E. Vansittart Neale, all of whom were to make a definite contribution to the trade union or co-operative movements. What distinguished them from most men of their class and generation was a burning desire to make the idea of God a reality by enlisting religion in the battle for social justice. They had seen, and been sickened by, sweating, slum housing, the adulteration of the food of the workers, the long hours and low wages generally prevailing and they were sensitive enough to realise that these things were the result of a radical defect in society and could not be attacked in isolation. Kingsley spoke for them all a little later in a famous sermon:

> The business for which God sends a Christian priest in a Christian nation is, to preach freedom, equality and brotherhood in the fullest, deepest and widest meaning of these three great words; that in as far as he does, he is a true priest, doing his Lord's work with his Lord's blessing on him; that in so far as he does not he is no priest at all, but a traitor to God and Man.

It took more courage than we can now easily recognise to speak like this in 1851, just as it took courage to write, as he did in *Alton Locke* a year earlier:

> Nine tenths of the improvement has been owing not to the masters but to the men themselves, and who among them, my aristocratic readers, do you think have been the great preachers of temperance, thrift, charity, self-respect and education ... The Chartists, the communist Chartists: upon whom you and your venal press heap every kind of cowardly execration and ribald slander.

Unfortunately in politics courage and good will are not enough, and we have to enquire in what practical forms this genuine desire to help the workers was able to find expression. When the group came into the open, to publish its periodicals, *Politics for the People* and the *Christian Socialist*, to which Kingsley under the name of Parson Lot was a leading contributor, what policy was put forward, what battles were fought?

At first the policy was nebulous. The slogan 'Be wise and you will be free' is repeated in various forms, and, while sympathy is expressed in general terms for the Charter, while, indeed, Parson Lot writes in one article, 'My only quarrel with the Charter is that it does not go far enough in reform,' at the next moment it is attacked as a 'Morrison's-pill-measure', a quack nostrum that cannot touch the real evils of the times. Again, at one point he seems to imply that the working men are as fit for the franchise as their 'betters', at another that they must wait for it till they are wiser, and at a third that it is not after all worth fighting for, being but the 'twenty thousandth part of a talker in the national palaver.'

When the movement began to look as though it might die away for lack of practical proposals, Ludlow returned from Paris full of enthusiasm over the co-operative workshops that had been established there, and henceforward association became the key-word. The Society for Promoting Working Man's Associations was formed, with the object of establishing productive associations which ultimately, it was hoped, might supersede competitive capitalism. This was the old utopian dream in a new form, but a number of associations were in fact set up and in the long run the movement towards association develped in two main directions, that of co-operative societies and that of trade unionism, both of which were then entering a new phase. The productive societies, as might have been predicted, had short and unhappy lives: on the trade union question there was more hesitation and some differences of opinion. Some of the group, notably Ludlow, Hughes and Neale, were wholehearted supporters, giving much

useful service, for example to the engineers in the great lock-out of 1852. Kingsley, once again, could not quite make up his mind. In general he was sympathetic, but strikes, and still more, violence of any kind, always made him uneasy. 'Emigrate rather than strike' was one of his sayings.

Years later he wrote a pamphlet called *What Then Does Dr Newman Mean?* which got him into very deep and very hot water. And often enough we feel impelled to ask 'What then does Mr Kingsley Mean?' for few men so honest can ever have landed themselves into such a tangle of contradictions. Yet, paradox as it may sound, the contradictions arise from the honesty. Kingsley wished to do right and to speak the truth; but for him, with his background and his limitations, what was right and true? It was impossible for him to say in general, and hence he tackled every question empirically as it arose. What he could see at a glance he saw clearly, and he spoke his mind about it with sometimes embarrassing vigour, but he seldom thought anything out to the end and often what seemed to him to be thought was only feeling in the guise of thought. So it was perfectly possible for him to feel two things with equal intensity of conviction which, logically, were mutually exclusive. Many people, like Mr Guy Kendall in his *Charles Kingsley and his Ideas*, have found this contradiction so hard to resolve, that they are forced to conclude that Kingsley's beliefs changed, that he had first a 'radical' and afterwards a 'Tory' period.

Thomas Hughes, who knew him, perhaps, better than anyone else at this time, denied this, and, I think, with justice. Certainly as late as 1856 we find him writing:

> I am the prophet of the coming convulsion; I cannot cry peace, peace when there is none. I see all things in Christendom drifting towards the hurricane circle of God's wrath and purifying storms.

Once again we are reminded of Marx's words: 'half lamentation, half lampoon; half echo of the past, half menace of the future ...' And here, I think, lies the solution of the problem.

Like many of his generation and class Kingsley was *both* radical *and* Tory. He believed in the worker: he believed in the aristocrat: he hated and distrusted the classes between. This comes out

amusingly when he writes of Browning:

> He will never be a poet. He was born and bred a Dissenter of the *trois état* and though he is a good fellow nothing will take the smell of tallow and brown sugar out of him ... If he had been born a gentleman ... or a hard-handed working man in contact with iron fact, he might have been a fine poet.

More directly to the point, he declared, as Marx did, that the Manchester School 'pretend to be the workmen's friends by keeping down the price of bread, when all they want thereby is to keep down wages'.

He went on to draw the conclusion, which Marx certainly would never have drawn,

> that the real battle of the time is ... not Radical or Whig against Peelite or Tory – let the dead bury their dead – but the Church, the gentlemen and the workmen against the Manchester School and shopkeepers.

It was left to Morris in Chapter XVIII of *News from Nowhere* to extract the grain of sense from this fantastic notion and to express it in socialist terms. It was only natural, holding such views, that Kingsley should write in 1850, which by any reckoning was in the very middle of his 'radical' period, 'I believe the Crown has now too little and not too much power,' on the grounds that Crown and Lords were a necessary counterpoise to the influence of capital in Parliament. So, too, it was possible, without any change of views or any dishonesty, for him to become Chaplain to the Queen and a personal friend of the Prince Consort, as he did in 1859.

Yet if Parson Lot was still alive it is perhaps true that he had moved a little into the background. Kingsley was by now a tired and in some ways a sick man. His vast store of mental energy had led him to overdrive himself, and, like many parsons with large families, the pressure of poverty was hard upon him and had forced him to divert much of this energy into the trade of novel writing. But, more fundamentally, he was a disappointed man. He had entered the battle in 1848 with great hopes, but his efforts seemed to have led to nothing. Association seemed to have failed, but instead of blaming himself and asking if the fault was not in the methods followed, he lost faith in the working class and concluded that they were not yet ready to be saved – a conclusion to which

saviours have always been rather prone. His beliefs were not so much abandoned as put in storage for a time that never came. As he wrote to Hughes:

> My heart was and is in it, and you'll see it will beat yet; but we ain't the boys. We don't see half the bull's eye yet, and we don't see *at all* the policeman which is a going on his beat behind the bull's eye, and no thanks to us.

Meanwhile there were the novels, praised above their merits in his day, unduly neglected in ours. Kingsley himself, like many poets, valued his poetry more highly than his prose: 'I feel like an otter in the water instead of an otter ashore.' Actually his poems hardly justify this preference, yet in a sense it was well founded. As a novelist in the ordinary meaning of the word he had almost every possible failing. He had no sense of the spoken word in dialogue, he was at once lifeless and involved, his plots creaked and his points were all made in so laboured and long winded a fashion that one sees them far too soon. Yet when he stops trying to write a novel and is content to tell a tale his work does begin to acquire a quality that is akin to epic poetry. He is able to slip off the accumulation of a thousand years and move into the stream of a simpler world. His merits and defects as a writer are, indeed, just those he revealed as a politician.

For this reason I think the best of his prose writings are those farthest removed from novels in the ordinary sense. In *The Heroes* he retells some of the Greek myths as well as they have ever been told in English before or since. In *The Water Babies* he gets right away from time and place into a world of fantasy where all his pet notions are at home. Yet in this very same book we find his finest descriptions of English landscape. With these I want to praise what has always seemed to me the best of his novels though one that has never had any serious consideration. In *Hereward the Wake* also the epic quality is strongest. It deals with that moment in time when the magical North overlaps the North of historic fact, the borderland of saga and fact. Kingsley is enough of the barbarian to convey something of the true feeling of this protean age and to charge his work with so overmastering a sense of Fate that we no more mind knowing how the tale is going to end than we do with the Volsunga Saga or one of the great ballads. And if he has

Christianised his Fate, after all he was a Christian and no more than any other writer can be expected to create except in terms of his own beliefs.

Something of the same quality can be observed when he writes from a living indignation as he does in *Alton Locke*, the story of a Chartist tailor and poet, based perhaps on that of Thomas Cooper who wrote in Stafford Gaol *The Purgatory of Suicides*. *Alton Locke* stands at the end of a notable series of novels dealing with the great question of the relation of the classes in England, a series that includes the *Sybil* trilogy (1844–47), *Mary Barton* (1848) and *Shirley* (1849). As a novel it can hardly be compared with any of these. It is both incoherent and inconclusive, with a 'solution' that solves nothing at all and some of the most preposterous characters and incidents that can be imagined. Yet here and there scenes and episodes stand out as if caught in a great flash of forked lightning which prints them on the memory for ever. Such scenes, for example, are the meeting in the frozen fens, the death of Jemmy Downes, Sandy Mackaye's shop, and the tour round hell on which he takes Locke to teach him his duty as a man and his mission as a poet.

And in one very important respect *Alton Locke* is an advance on all its predecessors: it shows a much clearer understanding of the point of view of the worker and especially of the most class-conscious worker. Though Chartism is finally condemned, it is for the first time in English fiction treated seriously and with sympathy. Throughout, there is a sense of the *rightness* of class solidarity which we should look for in vain in any of the other middle-class writers of the time. Kingsley says:

> I do not think the cry 'Get on' to be anything but a devil's cry. The moral of my book is that the working class man who tries to get on, to desert his class and rise above it, enters into a lie, and leaves God's path and his own – with consequences.

In such a passage as this we see the highest point reached by the Tory socialist. As compared with, say, Ludlow or Hughes, who were content to do useful work within very definite limitations, Kingsley both aimed at more and achieved less. It was his tragedy that he could never pass beyond this point, never quite erase the old feudal coat of arms, and, as a result, all his direct work ended in failure and disillusion, as the people 'deserted with loud and

irreverent laughter'. His Association was no more successful than Ruskin's Company of St George, and for the same sort of reasons, but by his writings he was, like Ruskin, one of those who helped to prepare the ground from which a genuine socialist movement was to spring a generation or so later.

The Conscience of John Ruskin

In almost any second-hand bookshop of the older style you may be certain to find a shelf, very high up, very thick with dust, containing a fine selection of the works of John Ruskin. They are seldom disturbed, and their titles, Latin or Biblical as often as not, rather conceal than reveal the quality of their contents. If the bookseller is of the generation of his shop he will certainly shake his head and murmur: 'Ah, yes, a wonderful writer but there seems no call for him today.'

In short, we do not now read Ruskin. Yet eighty and even forty years ago, there was hardly a young man of any seriousness who did not look to him as a master. William Morris and Tom Mann and hundreds of socialists of their time began by reading Ruskin. If the best of them went on to read Marx and soon passed beyond their first teacher, he never lost their love and respect.

Today we begin with Marx and never reach Ruskin and our socialism is perhaps the poorer for it. We are never likely to give him the unquestioning reverence which he had from many of his contemporaries, but we should at least remember with gratitude the debt which socialism in Britain owes him.

Ruskin was the only child of wealthy and over-fond (though by no means over-indulgent) parents, who very early determined that their son was a genius and should be a bishop. At Oxford he decided instead to be an art critic. The immediate success of *Modern Painters* reconciled his father to this change of profession. From the start, his criticism was of a new and potentially dangerous kind. Instead of looking at a picture as a thing in itself bounded by a frame, he looked at it as the result of a man's work in society. As Morris put it: 'The essence of what Ruskin then taught was ... that the art of any epoch must of necessity be the expression of its social life.' When he passed from painting to

architecture he found this belief powerfully reinforced.

From this it was a logical step to conclude that a really great art, in the sense of a great national school or tradition of art, can only arise from a just and righteous society. And he began to perceive, with increasing horror and despair, that no such art was to be found in nineteenth-century England nor, indeed, in modern Europe at all. He concluded, therefore, that English society was neither just nor righteous, and began to enquire in what respect precisely it fell short.

He was now about forty, recognised everywhere as the highest authority in his own field. Everything he had to say was accepted with what we now feel to have been excessive deference. It was a different matter when he turned from the criticism of art to the criticism of society. Beginning a study of political economy, he soon discovered that what passed for an objective science was in fact no more than an elaborate system of special pleading for capitalism, in which the peculiar relations resulting from bourgeois society were solemnly elevated into eternal laws.

In 1860 he began to publish in the *Cornhill Magazine*, edited at that time by Thackeray, a series of articles attacking this bogus science in a most damaging, if sometimes amateurish, way. The conclusions to which he seemed to be driving were that a society based on competition was a society based on robbery, and that the special injustice of modern society lay in degrading the worker into a thing, by treating his labour power as a commodity whose price ought to be competitively determined. This was in fact to attack the whole sacred structure of accepted class relations.

Hardly had the series begun when there was a ferocious outcry in all orthodox quarters, pressure was brought to bear on the editor and publisher of the magazine, and after only four articles had appeared (they were afterwards published in book form as *Unto This Last*), the series was abruptly closed. Ruskin set to work on a new and more systematic attack. Two years later, Froude began to publish it in *Frazer's Magazine*. Once more there was a storm of protest, and once more Ruskin was forcibly silenced.

Believing passionately in the importance of what he had to say, he found that it was impossible to get a hearing whenever he tried to tell capitalist society that its commercial ethic was only the old sin of usury in a new guise. Driven inwards, his anger and disgust became more and more transformed into an agony of conscience.

As a member of the ruling class, he felt a personal responsibility for all the oppressions and atrocities, all the sins of commission and omission, of which it was guilty. In this situation, and in this state of mind, he began in 1781 to print and publish himself *Fors Clavigera*, a series of monthly 'Letters to the workmen and labourers of Great Britain'.

The rich would not hear him – perhaps the poor might. *Fors Clavigera* is in some respects the finest of all Ruskin's work. Sometimes incoherent and often perverse, there are few books in the language that approach its range and power. Certainly it was, of all his writings, the one from which he hoped most.

Yet from the start he imposed upon himself a fatal handicap. He spoke to the people always from above, never with the sense that it was from themselves that salvation must come. So that, though he could diagnose the ills of society, his suggested remedies were always inadequate or inapplicable – and in his heart he knew it. Years later he wrote to a friend:

> Don't you know that I am entirely with you in this Irish misery, and have been these thirty years? – only one can't speak plain without distinctly becoming the leader of Revolution? I know that Revolution *must come* in all the world – but I can't act with Danton and Robespierre, nor with the modern French Republican or Italian one. I *could* with you and your Irish, but you are only at the beginning of the end. I have spoken – and plainly too – for all who have ears to hear.

He wrote *Fors*, therefore, with an ever growing sense of guilt that finally deepened into despair and madness. The key is struck in the very first Letter:

> I simply cannot paint, nor read, nor look at minerals, nor do anything else I like, and the very light of the morning sky, when there is any – which is seldom, nowadays, near London – has become hateful to me, because of the misery that I know of, and see signs of where I know it not, which no imagination can interpret too bitterly.

That was in January, and already the war between France and Prussia, and the siege of Paris, stood high among the miseries which troubled him. With the Commune, his agony of conscience that spring became unbearable.

This is of extreme importance, because for people of Ruskin's generation, and indeed for long after, the Paris Commune was a touchstone, just as the Russian Revolution and the Soviet Union have become the touchstone in our own time. That is why the

celebration of the Commune was for so long a point of honour to the old socialists. It is, therefore, interesting to see in some detail how Ruskin stands this test, and to find that he is perhaps the only leading public figure in England who wrote with sympathy and some understanding about the Commune while it was still taking place.

He first refers to it in Letter VI, written towards the end of May, and obviously not at all understanding the principle involved in the attempt to disarm the National Guard:

> All mouths are very properly open now against the Paris Communists because they fight that they may get wages for marching about with flags. But what do the upper classes fight for, then? What have they fought for since the world became upper and lower, but that they might have wages for walking about with flags, and that mischievously?

He goes on to speak of reports then reaching England of the destruction of the art treasures of Paris by the Communards. These reports, which he could not then know to be untrue, naturally filled him with horror. Nevertheless he insists firmly that the people were only acting as they had been taught to act by their 'betters'.

In the next Letter he returns to his theme. He does not, he says, altogether understand the new Parisian Communism, being himself: 'a Communist of the old school – reddest also of the red'. This might be misleading. Ruskin himself always denied being a socialist, and a few Letters later in *Fors* declared himself, with equal sincerity, 'a violent Tory of the old school – Sir Walter Scott's school, that is to say, and Homer's.'

His Communism was of the kind that will be recognised by readers of the third section of *The Communist Manifesto*, and, like More's, from whom he claimed to derive most of it, it may be summed up in the phrase, 'everything *for* the people, nothing *by* the people'. It was, nevertheless, an act of real courage at such a moment to avow himself a Communist at all, and he proceeds in the same Letter to discuss war and the war of classes:

> The first reason for all wars, and the necessity of national defences, is that the majority of persons, high and low, in all European nations, are Thieves, and, in their hearts, greedy of their neighbours goods, lands and fame ... And the guilty Thieves of Europe, the real source of all dead war in it, are the Capitalists – that is to say, people who live by

> percentages on the labour of others; instead of by fair wages for their own. The *Real* war in Europe, of which this fighting in Paris is the Inauguration, is between these and the workman, such as they have made him. They kept him poor, ignorant, and sinful, that they might, without his knowledge, gather for themselves the produce of his toil. At last, a dim insight of the fact of this dawns upon him; and such as they have made him he meets them, and *will* meet.

If this is language more appropriate to the Jacquerie of the fourteenth century than to the modern class struggle, Ruskin leaves us in no doubt whose cause he regards as just.

He makes his views clearer still in the next Letter (VIII), written at the end of July, when the earlier reports, heavily biased against the Commune, were being corrected by news of the government's Terror, too wholesale to be entirely concealed. There was news, also, of the success of a government loan:

> Everybody in France who has got any money is eager to lend it to M. Thiers at 5 per cent ... So there is great acclaim and triumphal procession of financiers! and the arrangement is made; namely, that all the poor labouring persons in France are to pay the idle rich ones 5 per cent, annually, on the sum of eighty millions of sterling pounds, until further notice.

Ruskin observes that a great part of this loan will go to provide an army, whose chief function will be to keep 'William' more firmly than before where he belongs:

> And they have got him down, now, they think, well for a while, poor William, after his fit of fury and petroleum: and can make their money out of him for years to come, in the old ways.

And then, using a device of which he was always a master, that of the contrasted newspaper reports, he works up to his climax:

> Did you chance, my friends, any of you, to see the other day the 83rd number of the *Graphic*, with the pictures of the Queen's concert in it? All the fine ladies sitting so trimly, and looking so sweet, and doing the whole duty of woman ... Surely we are safe back again, with our virtues in satin slippers and lace veils; and our Kingdom of Heaven is come again, *with* observation, and crown diamonds of the dazzlingest ... and vulgar Hell reserved for the canaille as heretofore. Hell shall be didactically portrayed, accordingly (see page 17). Wickedness going to its poor Home – bitter sweet. Ouvrier and pétroleuse – prisoners at last – glaring wild on their way to die.

> Alas, of these two divided races, of whom one was appointed to teach and guide the others, which has indeed sinned deepest – the unteaching, or the untaught? – which are now the guiltiest – these, who perish, or those – who forget?
>
> Ouvrier and pétroleuse; they are gone their way – to their death. But for these, the Virgin of France shall yet unfold the oriflamme above their graves, and lay her blanched lilies on their smirched dust. Yes, and for these the great Charles shall rouse his Roland, and bid him put trump to lip and breathe a point of war; and the helmed Pucelle shall answer with a woodnote of Domrémy; yes, and for these the Louis they mocked, like his master, shall raise his holy hands and pray God's peace.
>
> 'Not as the world giveth.' Everlasting shame only, and unrest, are the world's gifts. These Swine of the 5 per cent shall share them duly.

We are inevitably reminded of Marx, with his 'monstrous gnome' and his 'storming heaven'. The fact that Marx was a revolutionary and *understood* the Commune, while Ruskin was not revolutionary and did not, makes his tribute all the more remarkable.

He began, I think, with the intention of condemning. He could not condemn, because he saw on the one side heroism and self-sacrice, and on the other nothing but bestial greed and bestial cruelty springing from guilty fear. So he turned aside from his condemnation to utter the blessing that his natural generosity and deep human feeling could not withhold.

With another upbringing, he, too, might have joined in the storming of heaven. As it was, he could never get a clear sight of the road. Rather he saw his task as that of Theseus in the Twenty-third Letter of *Fors*, who must penetrate the Labyrinth, kill the Minotaur Commercialism and retrace his steps. Lacking a clue, he perished in the twisted ways, but, perishing himself, he was able to set thousands on the true path.

An Englishman Discovers India

A flat mediocrity pervades the city which E.M. Forster has created as the scene of *A Passage to India*:

> Except for the Marabar Caves – and they are twenty miles off – the city of Chandrapore presents nothing extraordinary. Edged rather than washed by the river Ganges, it trails for a couple of miles along the bank, scarcely distinguishable from the rubbish it deposits so freely. The streets are mean, the temples ineffective, and though a few fine houses exist they are hidden away in gardens or down alleys whose filth deters all but the invited guest. There is no painting and scarcely any carving in the bazaars. The very wood seems made of mud, the inhabitants of mud moving ... As for the civil station [the English quarter], it provokes no emotion. It charms not, neither does it repel. It is sensibly planned, with a red-brick club on its brow, and farther back a grocer's and a cemetery, and the bungalows are disposed along roads that intersect at right angles. It has nothing hideous about it, and only the view is beautiful; it shares nothing with the city except the overarching sky.

Such is the setting, the people and the events are hardly more remarkable. The former are middle-class English and Indians. No one is very rich or very poor, outstandingly wicked or outstandingly virtuous, none are more intelligent or more stupid than one would expect to find in such a place. Nor are there any heroisms or oppressions, no one is particularly cruel or violent, and the centre of the plot is a crime that was never committed. Yet in this setting and within these limits the most profound human emotions are experienced – pity, terror, love, hate, fear and exaltation, friendship and the final loneliness of the soul in the

waste places. And out of it all Forster has contrived one of the very few novels of our time which have the unquestionable stamp of greatness.

How has this been done? Not, most certainly, by the mere plot, which is as ordinary as the scene. To the compact, second-rate little English community of Chandrapore come two strangers: Adela Quested and Mrs Moore. Adela is expecting to marry Ronny Heaslop, the son of Mrs Moore by a first marriage. They refuse to accept the prevailing view that India and Indians are outside the range of human sympathy, and are full of a vague desire to 'see India'. They do meet some Indians, including a young doctor, Aziz, and they are encouraged by an English teacher, Cyril Fielding, who stands alone in his determination to treat Indians as equals. From their friendship with Aziz comes a party to visit the Marabar Caves, the one notable feature of the district.

These caves have a sinister but never fully explained quality, which makes them, and the visit to them, the centre of the book. Above all, they have an echo:

> 'Boum' is the sound as far as the human alphabet can express it, or 'bou-oum' or 'ou-boum' – utterly dull. Hope and politeness, the blowing of a nose, the squeak of a boot, all produce 'boum'. Even the striking of a match starts a little worm coiling, which is too small to complete a circle, but is eternally watchful. And if several people talk at once, an overlapping howling noise begins, echoes generate echoes, and the cave is stuffed with a snake composed of small snakes, which writhe independently.

In one of these caves Mrs Moore experiences a nightmare vision, the vision of the negative side of that India she is trying to discover, a vision which stuns, crushes and finally destroys her. Later in the day Adela has a hysterical panic in another cave, and rushes out to accuse Aziz of attempted rape.

Her hysteria spreads through the whole English community and Aziz has to stand trial in an atmosphere of intense emotion which naturally produces its counterpart among the Indian population. Fielding alone, whose friendship with Aziz is one of the main themes of the book, is able to resist this hysteria and remains firm in his conviction of his friend's innocence. At the trial Adela, suddenly realising that she has been mistaken, withdraws her charges and Aziz is released amid scenes of riotous enthusiasm.

His accusers are reprimanded, Fielding is promoted, Adela returns to England, Mrs Moore dies. Such is the barest outline of the plot: it gives no indication at all of the substance or quality of *A Passage to India*.

This neat, hard, conventional little plot is indeed no more than the *occasion* for the book. It is rather like a stone thrown into a pond, and quickly disappears from sight: the real book is, as it were, the concentric rings so produced, spreading from the centre till the whole surface of life is covered and disturbed. It is the vehicle for a profound exploration of personal and social relationships, not only of the special relations existing in a colonial country like the pre-war India but of problems that are permanent and universal. And, to underline the fact that the plot is only a small part of the whole, we have the lovely and difficult Part III, which forms a sort of coda, adding nothing to the plot but exploring and illuminating the questions it has raised.

In order to see what these questions are we ought to go back a little, and to ask what sort of a man Forster is and what are his beliefs about life and society. Like Chandrapore, he presents at first sight nothing extraordinary. He is now 86 years old, a member of an intelligent, liberal, upper-middle-class family. He had a creditable record at Cambridge University, and between 1905 and 1910 produced four excellent novels of which the last, *Howard's End*, is the most important. His next, and only other, novel, *A Passage to India*, did not appear till 1924. In addition he had written short stories, critical essays, a biography of his friend G. Lowes Dickinson and other miscellaneous works. A small enough total output for one who has always made a profession of letters, yet it is not too much to say that he is not only the most considerable of living English writers but the only one who is indisputably of the first rank.

This is in part because of a sheer technical supremacy, of his balanced and civilised style, the precision of his judgements, his complete mastery of his chosen medium and material. These things mark the expert and mature novelist. His real importance as a writer springs, I believe, rather from the quality of his attitude to living. Life, he says, is real, not a school. It does not teach us, it changes us. It is this sense of reality which is the outstanding characteristic of all his novels. The people are real people to whom things really happen, who suffer, triumph, and, sometimes, are

destroyed. There is waste, chaos, chance, and, including and transcending these, a unity, a purpose and a cohesion, a 'vital mess' out of which good and evil perpetually arise.

Within this 'vital mess' men exist as individuals and as social beings. For Forster the central problem is how they are to establish valid contacts with each other and at the same time preserve their individuality. In almost all his books this problem arises in some form: man exists in society divided by class, by nationality, by diversity of culture – the existence in India of two peoples, the ruling and the ruled, is only a special case of a universal schism – in what way, and under what social conditions, can men enter upon the valid and satisfying human relationships without which they do not attain the full stature of human dignity? Forster, who all his life has been a champion of freedom and justice, would reply first of all 'only in a free and democratic society will this be possible'. Yet it is necessary to go further and to discover what is implied by such a society. In 1939, standing as he believed upon the edge of catastrophe, he wrote in a pamphlet called *What I Believe*:

> So two cheers for Democracy; one because it admits variety and two because it permits criticism. Two are quite enough: there is no occasion to give three. Only love the Beloved Republic deserves that.

So that it is really a question of terms. There is formal democracy, the means, the institution, something worth defending and something which Forster has never failed to defend against its open enemies and its false friends. But it is chiefly to be valued because it alone can provide the conditions for the growth of the true democracy, the 'Beloved Republic'. Democracy in this sense means to Forster the understanding that other people are as real as oneself. He condemns the English characters in *A Passage to India* not because they are unjust or oppressive but precisely because they fail so conspicuously to reach this understanding. Ronnie Heaslop is not a bad man. To his fellow countrymen he is capable of generosity and even of nobility, yet he fails and we are left in no doubt as to the cause of his failure:

> Every day he worked hard in the court, trying to decide which of two untrue accounts was the less untrue, trying to dispense justice fearlessly, to protect the weak against the less weak, the incoherent against the plausible ... One touch of regret from the heart – not the canny substitute but the true regret from the heart – would have made him a different man and the British Empire a different institution.

It is this failure of the heart, Forster calls it elsewhere 'the undeveloped heart', which lies at the root, which makes human relations impossible, which stands in the way of the Beloved Republic. The whole drama of *A Passage to India* is played before an oppressive, inescapable background of brutal sunlight, gathering in strength as the hot season descends. The sun is both a character and a symbol, the symbol of power without beauty and intellect without love, a master from whose dominion there is no escape. In this atmosphere human relationships, even within the closed group of the ruling race, wither and are formalised, while real friendship between Indians and English becomes almost impossible. Even the friendship between Fielding and Aziz, valuable and important as it is, is kept alive only by constant effort and fails in the end of full flowering.

The complete honesty with which it analyses the psychology of a colonial society, the waste, the frustration and the bitterness which inequality produces upon both sides, is one of the book's most valuable qualities. For it is not the English alone who are stunted by this false relationship. If, as Acton said, power corrupts, so equally does powerlessness, and the Indian characters are not idealised to afford a cheap and easy contrast with their rulers. On the contrary, they are frequently bitter, suspicious, unstable and lacking in moral force. Their powerlessness has engendered the very qualities which may seem to justify the arrogance and lack of sympathy with which they are treated. Yet they are alive, their mess is a vital mess, while the English community, more efficient perhaps, is condemned by its lack of roots to a sterile rectitude.

This is the aspect upon which Forster dwells most. *A Passage to India* is not in the ordinary sense a political book, though the questions with which it deals are of course of great political importance. This is perhaps partly because it was written in 1924, when the Indian national movement was still in its early stages, and because the material for it was collected by Forster during his still earlier visits to India in 1910 and 1922, visits which he later described in *The Hill of Devi*. But even more, perhaps, because Forster does, rightly or wrongly, tend to see the problem rather as a personal than a political one. And when, at the end of the book, the political issue is raised sharply, it is raised in a personal form and we pass out of the tyranny of the sun into the shade of the Beloved Republic.

Aziz, embittered by his experiences, has renounced the English and all their works, taking refuge in a backward Native State. Here, in a final meeting with Fielding, they argue about the future. Aziz says:

> 'Down with the English anyhow. That's certain. Clear out you fellows double quick ... and then' – he rode against him furiously – 'and then', he concluded, half kissing him, 'you and I shall be friends.'
>
> 'Why can't we be friends now?' said the other, holding him affectionately, 'It's what I want. It's what you want.'
>
> But the horses didn't want it – they swerved apart; the earth didn't want it, sending up rocks through which the riders must pass single file; the temples, the tank, the jail, the birds, the carrion ... they didn't want it, they said in their hundred voices 'No, not yet,' and the sky said 'No, not here'.

T.S. Eliot – A Personal View

I

The death of T.S. Eliot must have set many people now in their fifties and sixties turning over old memories. Of the three indisputably major poets writing in English in the twentieth century – Hardy, Yeats and Eliot, Eliot, though perhaps the least in stature, was nevertheless the most influential. And it was, I think, by my particular generation, those who were young in the 1920s, who grew up not during, but immediately after the First World War, that his influence was most deeply felt. If, therefore, I speak here about myself, it is not I hope from mere egotism, but because I believe my reaction may have been typical, and because I believe that in recalling Eliot's impact as I remember it, and by trying to evaluate that impact, I may be able to say something useful about Eliot himself.

When in 1923, at the age of 20, I first came upon *The Waste Land*, I was already a socialist, or rather, perhaps, was feeling my way, with many hesitations, towards socialism. To anyone but a fully conscious revolutionary Britain and Europe at that time seemed a desperate chaos: we indeed welcomed the October Revolution but were far from understanding in significance. Elsewhere the revolutionary wave was ebbing. We saw hunger and misery and unemployment everywhere. At the same time I was beginning to try to be a poet and was seriously concerned with poetic problems. There seemed little enough that could help me. The cosiness which was characteristic of much of the poetry of the preceding decades had no relation to the grim realities of our post-war world. Hardy already belonged to an age that was past, and Yeats, greatly as I admired his work, still did not seem quite relevant to our problems. Owen and Rosenberg, the best of the

war poets, would have meant something, but for some reason did not come my way till rather later.

What came was *The Waste Land*, and its impact was all the greater because of its difference from anything then current. As Edgell Rickword wrote in a historic review:

> If there were to be held a Congress of Younger Poets, and it were desired to make some kind of show of recognition to the poet who has most effectively upheld the reality of the art in an age of preposterous poeticising, it is impossible to think of any serious rival to the name of T.S. Eliot.[1]

From *The Waste Land*, like most of my contemporaries, I passed on to the criticism contained in *The Sacred Wood*, and was surprised to find it so urbane and rational, at times, even a little prim. Only after some interval did we discover the earlier poems, though these had been published in 1917 and 1920. They reinforced but did not add materially to the impression created by *The Waste Land*. We were, however, delighted by the almost impudent wit they sometimes revealed:

> The hippotamus's day
> Is passed in sleep; at night he hunts;
> God works in a mysterious way –
> The Church can sleep and feed at once.

Or:

> I shall not want Capital in Heaven
> For I shall meet Sir Alfred Mond:
> We two shall lie together, lapt
> In a five per cent Exchequer Bond.

This line of approach was, I think, general among my contemporaries. We met Eliot first in his most demanding, and, I still think, his most impressive work.

We found in *The Waste Land* not all that was there, but rather the things we most needed at the time and could find nowhere else. Above all we found the most eloquent expression of what horrified us most in the modern world – on the one hand its desolation and squalor, on the other, the anarchy and instability of which we were perhaps over-conscious. The very obscurity of the poem, its strange and unexpected transitions, which were much more

startling in the early 1920s than they seem today, mirrored exactly what we ourselves were feeling.

And the central, unifying myth of the Waste Land perishing from lack of life-giving water seemed peculiarly appropriate to the modern world, to the dreary cities packed with men who were enslaved by things, who lived *dry* lives in which their work had had all meaning drained from it by the labour discipline of capitalism. The Waste Land gained an extra reality by being localised in modern London:

> A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
> I had not thought death had undone so many.
> Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
> And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.
> Flowed up the hill and down King William Street,
> To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours
> With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine.

After the genteel rusticity of so much of the minor poetry of the early twentieth century this new poetry of the city came as a revelation of what was possible.

We felt that here at last was a poet who shared our concern about the condition of the world, who was not prepared to pretend that all was well, or to take refuge from reality in some make-believe world of his own. And here, perhaps, what we can now see as a negative feature of Eliot's outlook helped. Alick West has placed his finger on this:

> The poem finally leaves us where we were. In which respect it is in striking contrast to its sources. As we have already indicated, the idea of the waste land is taken from primitive fertility ritual ... In the old ritual there was the *purpose* of making the land fertile; in the old romances the fertility was restored. In *The Waste Land* the land remains waste. The Fisher King of the old legend appears at the end of Mr Eliot's poem still in the same plight as at the beginning.[2]

This may well be so, but this was perhaps just what appealed to us in 1923. Europe was still a waste land and any contrived appearance of a solution would have offended and repelled us. We were feeling our own way towards a solution, or many of us were. We were not prepared to have a ready-made solution foisted upon us. Thus Eliot's bleak pessimism was one of the things which compelled our respect.

The Waste Land came to our generation as a liberating experience for these and other, more directly poetic, reasons. One was its extension of our poetic frontiers. By the end of the nineteenth century English poetry had grown extremely narrow. It was assumed that only certain subjects were 'poetic' and that these should be treated in a style and language that were in fact those of romanticism in the last stages of degeneration. Romanticism, which had once been a liberating and revolutionary force, had now become a stifling orthodoxy. Eliot was not, of course, alone in feeling this or in wishing to restore to poetry a lost robustness. Hardy, for example, and Owen, in their very different ways, had been moving in the same direction. But it was with the publication of *The Waste Land* that the turning point was reached, and later, in *Homage to John Dryden*, Eliot supplied a theoretical defence for his innovations. Henceforth it became less and less possible to restrict the subject matter of poetry, or to demand that the poet should only use a diction traditionally accepted as poetic. The matter of poetry could now be anything the poet was capable of digesting, and, broadly speaking, a poet is as good as his digestion. It is no fault of Eliot that some of his admirers habitually attempted to use matter they were incapable of assimilating. Bad poetry can be written to any formula, and it is perhaps true that Eliot's poetic influence has been least fruitful among his more enthusiastic disciples.

Of course, as with so many of his other innovations, there was a less happy side which was perhaps not so apparent to us in the 1920s as it should have been. While it was good at this point for the hold of a stale and degenerate romanticism to be broken, Eliot, whether he knew it or not, was attacking the whole romantic tradition not only for these reasons but as Alick West has shown precisely because romanticism had a revolutionary aspect and was still potentially a revolutionary force.[3] For this reason it was easy for Eliot's influence to become, at a later date, an orthodoxy as restrictive and more reactionary than the one he had helped to destroy. There is a continuity as well as a contradiction between Eliot as a liberating force and Eliot as a pillar of the establishment.

But, immediately, the blinding success of his new poetic methods was what held our attention. Whatever other reasons there may have seen for his success, it would not have been possible without his superb professionalism, the seriousness which

he brought to the trade of being a poet. *The Waste Land* succeeded first because it comes off as a poem, because of the precision of its language, the vividness and inevitability of its images, standing out all the more sharply because of the frequent obscurity of the thought. All this, as became even clearer when the earlier poems were taken into the account, could only come from a long preoccupation with the mastery of a technique. As Rickword says:

> It is by his struggle with technique that Mr Eliot has been able to get closer than any other poet to the physiology of our sensations (a poet does not speak merely for himself) to explore and make palpable the more intimate distresses of a generation for whom all the romantic escapes had been blocked.[4]

There was a further contradiction in *The Waste Land* which only became apparent to most of us a good deal later. There can be no mistaking Eliot's agonised concern over our post-war chaos, however mistaken we may feel some of its manifestations to have been. For him, in truth, 'London Bridge is falling down'. But for him, also, London Bridge is, in the last resort, the whole structure of bourgeois culture and values, which, however critical of many aspects of bourgeois society he may be, are the only ones he knows or can imagine. Consquently, he can see only the negative aspects of the changes taking place in his world. This became increasingly obvious with time, but we ought, perhaps, to have seen the evidence for it in *The Waste Land* more quickly than most of us did. As with so much else, the October Revolution provided a touch-stone. And to Eliot, it meant nothing but a new kind of barbarism threatening all that he understood by civilisation. This appears particularly in Section V, *What the Thunder Said*, one of the themes of which is, as he explains in a note, 'the present decay of eastern Europe':

> There is not even solitude in the mountains
> But red sullen faces sneer and snarl
> From the doors of mudcracked houses

he writes, and:

> Who are those hooded hordes swarming
> Over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth
> Ringed by the flat horizon only
> What is the city over the mountains
> Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air.

More than this, the Land is Waste because the King (already, anticipating Eliot's later development, a *sacred* King) has become impotent to exercise his functions, because it is ungoverned. He hopes, though he dare not expect, that some day the traditional order may re-establish itself. Here already the conservatism, the desire to repose upon authority, which came to dominate his thinking, is implicit. The difference between his later position and that apparent in *The Waste Land* is perhaps that, desiring a refuge, a rock under whose shadow he could rest, he cannot see where to look for it.[5]

The consequence is a terrible and increasing tension. In his next poem, *The Hollow Men* (1925), this tension approaches a breaking point. No one could live permanently in this nightmare world, in 'death's dream kingdom'.

> This is the dead land
> This is the cactus land
> Here the stone images
> Are raised, here they receive
> The supplication of a dead man's hand
> Under the twinkle of a fading star.

This was the nadir, the turning point, and to us at the time Eliot's future development seemed to offer genuinely alternative possibilities. Would he be able to move out of 'this valley of dying stars' into alliance with the progressive forces of the time, towards a solution in human terms, even towards Marxism, or would be try to find his solution elsewhere? Today it seems obvious that his whole past, the cultural background of the Anglican Boston intellectual, made a positive solution impossible for him, but at the time we waited with some hope. *Ash Wednesday* (1930) gave us our answer.

The tension was to be resolved, or rather, perhaps, evaded, by a retreat from reality into mystical religion. Yet the retreat was an unwilling one. As he climbs the twisted stair he sees as through a window a vision of the reality he is leaving that has always seemed to me unbearably poignant:

> ... a slotted window bellied like fig's fruit
> And beyond the hawthorn blossom and a pasture scene
> The broadbacked figure drest in blue and green
> Enchanted the maytime with an antique flute.

Blown hair is sweet, brown hair over the mouth blown.
Lilac and brown hair;
Distraction, music of the flute, stops and steps of
the mind over the third stair,
Fading, fading; strength beyond hope and despair
Climbing the third stair.

Of all Eliot's poems *Ash Wednesday* is the most moving and the most personal. Elsewhere, Eliot indeed speaks, but he speaks through some dramatic figure, who is at once himself and not himself, through Prufrock, through the old sailor in *Gerontion*, through Tiresias and even through the scarecrow of the *The Hollow Men*. Here alone he speaks entirely for himself. He was never to do so again. In the subsequent short poems, in the *Quartets* (for all their technical dexterity) and even more in the series of plays which occupied so unprofitably his later years, the retreat into aridity goes on unchecked:

Ash on an old man's sleeve
Is all the ash the burnt roses leave.
Dust in the air suspended
Marks the place where a story ended.
Dust inbreathed was a house –
The wall, the wainscot and the mouse.
The death of hope and despair,
This is the death of air.[6]

It is the tragic story of the defeat of a great poet, and all the more tragic because it was self-inflicted and because Eliot himself cannot have been unaware of it. In 1940, speaking about Yeats, he said:

> But in fact, very few poets have shown this capacity of adaptation to the years. It requires, indeed, an exceptional honesty and courage to face the change. Most men either cling to the experiences of youth, so that their writing becomes an insincere mimicry of their earlier work, or they leave their passion behind, and write only from the head, with a hollow and wasted virtuosity. There is another and even worse temptation: that of becoming dignified, of becoming public figures with only a public existence – coat-racks hung with decorations and distinctions, doing, saying and even thinking and feeling only what they believe the public expects of them. Yeats was not that kind of poet.[7]

Is it possible that he did not pause here to ask himself silently how he stood by this reckoning? Yet through this defeat something

remained, a certain poetic integrity which he continued to serve, and in serving which, as he said upon the same occasion, the poet is 'at the same time rendering the greatest service he can to his own nation and to the whole world'.[8]

II

In 1927, before writing about Eliot had become a major literary industry, I published an essay on his poetry, an essay which today I must regard as uncritical and wholly inadequate.[9] Eliot, however, wrote to me appreciatively about it, saying that I had noted some features of his work which other critics had ignored. Soon after we met, and for the next ten years I was a regular contributor to the *Criterion* of which he was editor. We lived in increasingly different worlds, and our personal contact was slight, but it would be unjust not to refer here to the invariable kindness and encouragement which I received from him at a time when this meant a great deal to a young man still unknown and just beginning to be a writer. This disinterested helpfulness to someone whose ideas were in every way opposed to his own was typical of Eliot and earned him the personal regard of many who disagreed most strongly with all that he came to stand for. I should add that during all the years of my association with the *Criterion* I had complete freedom to express in it a viewpoint which Eliot must have thought entirely mistaken.

This leads us to a further contradiction. The editorial policy of the *Criterion* was avowedly reactionary. Eliot's high Toryism was shared by many of his contributors, and the foreign contributors especially, with whose long, boring and pretentious cultural-political articles the journal was too often weighted down, were drawn from the extreme right in France and Germany. The *Criterion*'s policy was the defence of the West and of Christian values – slogans with which we are too familiar today for it to be necessary here to dwell on their implications. Yet alongside all this it contained a remarkable amount of positive and even actively progressive writing, both critical and creative – Hugh McDiarmid's *Second Hymn to Lenin* to give only one example.[10]

Dr Leavis even goes so far as to declare that it became the 'organ' of 'the young poetical Communists and fellow-travellers and their friends'.[11] This is absurd. An examination of the contents of any selection of issues during any period of the *Criterion*'s

existence will show that, however loosely one might define 'Marxist', the contributors who could be included under such a head were never more than a small minority. I think it is correct to say that I was the only actual Communist who contributed regularly, though others did so from time to time. All the same, it is true that the *Criterion* did provide a platform for a number of young writers who were at that time sympathetic to Communism and whose viewpoint differed radically from its general policy. I believe that Eliot was perfectly sincere when, writing in 1948 about his editorship, he claimed:

> The ideas with which you did not agree, the opinions which you could not accept, were as important to you as those which you found immediately acceptable. You examined them without hostility, and with the assurance that you could learn from them. In other words, we could take for granted an interest, a delight, in ideas for their own sake, in the free play of the intellect ... It was our business not so much to make any particular ideas prevail, as to maintain intellectual activity on the highest level.[12]

I believe also that there was more in this than toleration. The characteristic qualification 'not so much' in the passage quoted above is a sufficient reminder that Eliot was no Liberal with abstract ideas about freedom of speech. Nor was he ever anything but hostile to Marxism. Yet he could never, during this period at least, quite escape from it. Constantly, and especially in his editorial comments which were a regular feature of the *Criterion*, he returns to examine it, to engage in polemic. And it is noteworthy that however much he condemns it, he treats it always with respect, as the one secular political philosophy which demands serious intellectual consideration. This is in marked contrast with the contempt with which he treats liberalism, or what he once called 'the Mensheviks of the London School of Economics'. Thus he writes:

> About certain very serious facts no one can dissent. The present system does not work properly, and more and more people are inclined to believe that it never did and that it never will; and it is obviously neither scientific nor religious. It is imperfectly adapted to every purpose except that of making money; and even for money-making it does not work very well, for its rewards are neither conducive to social justice nor even proportioned to intellectual activity ... Secondly, no one who is seriously concerned can fail to be impressed by the work of

> Karl Marx. He is, of course, much more cited than read; but his power is so great, and his analysis so profound, that it must be very difficult for anyone who reads him without prejudice on the one hand, or without any definite religious faith on the other, to avoid accepting his conclusions.[13]

It is hardly necessary to add, perhaps, that the paragraph which follows this begins 'But ...' Again, he writes:

> Our present danger is that our public men will be divided into trimmers and men of principle; that men of principle, men who refuse to listen to that siren song that the true spirit of Britain is 'the spirit of compromise', must become either extreme Tories or extreme Communists, with (no doubt) a respect for each other that they cannot feel for the trimmers, and perhaps in consequence a sense of relief at having something positive to fight. There is a very practical sense in which it is possible to 'love one's enemies'; and the Tory of tomorrow and the Communist of tomorrow will perhaps love each other better than they can love the politicians.[14]

It would be possible to quote many more such passages. In these years Eliot seemed obsessed with Communism (or, rather, with Marxism, since it was the ideas behind Communism with which he was concerned). He returns to it again and again from various angles, and always there is this unwilling respect. I cannot escape the conclusion that there was some part of his mind which recognised in Marxism that alternative path which he had been unable to take at the crisis of his development in the late 1920s. I associate this unwilling respect with the unwilling retreat from reality which I mentioned earlier.

Eliot's declaration that he stood for Catholicism, Classicism and Royalism has perhaps been more often quoted than it deserves: not doubt it was sincere: equally doubtlessly it was intended to be provocative.[15] His comment some years later suggests that he felt he had been more than successful here:

> Catholics, and especially Anglo-Catholics ... are qualified as bigoted reactionaries, or as reckless socialists, according to the disposition of the hostile critic and the tendencies of some individual Catholics whom he has in mind. I think that the virtue of tolerance is greatly overestimated, and I have no objection to being called a bigot myself; but that is an individual concern. But I am the more careful in the matter, because some years ago I made, wisely or unwisely, a brief announcement of faith, religious, political and literary, which became too easily quotable.[16]

The statement in question was perhaps a rash attempt to summarise in a phrase attitudes which, as I have tried to indicate, are really extremely complex.

Eliot's social-critical positions – the belief that the preservation of culture, which he has tended to interpret very narrowly, depends upon a small elite, the increasing stress laid upon the importance of authority and tradition – have proved deadening both to himself and to those readers who have been so misguided as to swallow him whole. Yet his particular judgements have often been brilliant and have proved fertilising. It is important, too, to distinguish between some of his original positions and the way in which he later developed them.

Thus, much that he had to say in his essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' was a most salutary attack on the decadent romantic conception of the artist as a special kind of person without social relations or responsibilities. In place of the idea of the artist as an isolated individual whose business was merely to express his personality it proposed the idea of him as an essential member of society, responsible and moulded by a past which constituted a unity with a present continually changing. The artist, by helping to change the present, changed the past also:

> The necessity that he shall conform, that he shall cohere, is not one-sided; what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art that preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for the order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art towards the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new.[17]

It is easy to see that such a conception, with its sense of historical movement, of the positive relation between the artist and society, and the further implication that man by his own acts creates his environment, is capable of development in a way not inconsistent with Marxism: it is no less easy to see why it was difficult, if not impossible, for Eliot to develop it in this way. Even in this early form one feels that the emphasis falls rather upon conformity and order than upon change. As D.M. Garman remarked in a review of *After Strange Gods*:

> There has always been a suspect morbidity about Eliot's preoccupation with tradition, even when his preoccupation was enabling him to render a very real service to criticism.[18]

Throughout the whole of his subsequent work this initially fertile conception of tradition is progressively weakened by identifying it with authority, with Anglican orthodoxy and with the defence of 'Christian values' which turn out in the end to be no more than bourgeois values. Tradition thus understood becomes merely a dead hand.

Eliot's influence has suffered some strange transformations. For years he had, as Yeats wrote in another connection, 'young men's praise and old men's blame'. He was regarded, on the one hand as the embodiment of all that was morbid and dangerous in English poetry, as a cultivator of ugliness for its own sake, and on the other as the bringer of new health and seriousness. He ended as English poetry's Grand Old Man, as a high Tory and a central figure of the literary establishment. Yet in a sense his later development was implicit even in his beginnings, more obviously, perhaps, in his criticism than in his poetry. He was never in any real sense a leader of revolt, but rather a standard around which certain forces of revolt gathered. His influence in the 1920s was probably more far-reaching and liberating than he intended or would ever have wished.

Conversely, even in his later years that influence was never wholly reactionary. What he had done could never be undone. Much of the fire went out of his poetry and it became progressively more arid, yet a certain integrity, an essential dignity, remained. His criticism lost its vigour and clarity, his commentary on social problems degenerated, as Garman puts it, 'into a method of avowal and retraction which is frequently completely negative'.[19] Yet even in his more obscurantist pronouncements there remains a core of social concern whose sincerity one is forced to recognise even while rejecting entirely both his diagnosis and his nostrums. It hardly seems possible in such a case to reach a balanced estimate of his influence on English literature and thought. Yet I for once am compelled to say that he stands high among those men of our time who once helped me to a better understanding of the contemporary world. There is much that I must reject, and I do not find it difficult to detect and discard what seems worthless. There remains a considerable remnant without which my mind

would have been both narrower and poorer and for which I can only be grateful.

Notes

1. *Calendar*, Vol. II No. 10, December 1925.
2. Alick West, *Crisis and Criticism*, London 1937, p.32.
3. Ibid., Ch. IV.
4. *Calendar*, loc. cit.
5. *The Waste Land*, lines 24–6.
6. *Little Gidding*, London 1942.
7. T.S. Eliot, *Selected Prose*, London 1953, p.203.
8. Ibid., p.205.
9. *Decachord*, Vol. II No. 12, March 1927.
10. *Criterion*, No. XLV, July 1932. I may perhaps claim some indirect share in the credit here. I remember in 1927 talking enthusiastically to Eliot about McDiarmid's recently published *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* and from what he said then McDiarmid's work was evidently still unknown to him.
11. F.R. Leavis, *New Bearings in English Poetry*, Harmondsworth 1963, p.187.
12. T.S. Eliot, *Selected Prose*, p. 244.
13. *Criterion*, No. XLIV, April 1932.
14. *Criterion*, No. XXXVII, July 1930.
15. In the preface to *For Lancelot Andrewes: Essays on Style and Order*, London 1928.
16. T.S. Eliot, *Essays Ancient and Modern*, London 1936. p.129.
17. T.S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*, London 1920, pp.44–5.
18. *Left Review*, Vol. 1 No. 1, October 1934.
19. Ibid.

III The Thirties and Wartime

Poetry and Property in a Communist Society

Hitherto, wrote Plekhanov in 1883, 'no one has attempted to "supplement" Marx by St Thomas Aquinas. Still, it may happen that, despite the recent papal encyclical against the Modernists, the Catholic world will produce a thinker capable of such a flight of fancy.' The attempt was, in fact, made by Wilhelm Hohoff, but it cannot be compared from the point of view of audacity to the attempt of Gallox to bring Stalin and the Pope into a common army for the defence of private property, which to him is necessarily private *capitalist* property.

With the Pope I am not very much concerned. Since extensive quotations have been made from the Encyclical 'Quadragesimo Anno' it is only necessary to point out that this document is objectively a defence of the existing capitalist system. It is true that certain abuses are criticised, notably unemployment, the propertyless condition of the workers and the growth of capitalist monopoly. But throughout runs the implication that these abuses are mere accidental defects in a system otherwise sound, instead of as being what they are, the logical outcome of that system. At the same time the advocacy of Catholic unions and the general attack upon socialism can only have the effect of helping to maintain the existing system, not as the Pope might ideally wish it to be, but as it actually is.

Gallox's misunderstanding of the speech delivered by Stalin last June goes far deeper than mere hasty misreading, though there is evidence enough of this. It is misleading, for example, to say that Stalin 'proposes that compulsion be used to get industrial labour out of rural districts' when what he actually calls for is a 'policy of organised recuiting'. Again, Gallox assumes throughout that forced labour and even slavery obtains in the Soviet Union. He gives no proof of this,and it is clearly contradicted by Stalin's own complaint that:

> ... it would be hard to find an enterprise where the staff of workers does not change at least 30 to 40 per cent in the course of a half-year, or even in one quarter. (*New Conditions: New Tasks*, p.7)

The failure of non-Marxists to understand what is going on in Russia today is almost always due to their inability to grasp the implications of the period of proletarian dictatorship. This is the reason why both the New Economic Policy and Stalin's declaration have been regarded by both friends and enemies of the Soviet Union as the first step to a return of capitalism.

The *Communist Manifesto* of 1848 outlines a policy to be put into operation immediately the workers have seized power:

> The proletariat will use its political supremacy in order, by degrees, to wrest all capital from the bourgeoisie, to centralise all the means of production into the hands of the state (this means the proletariat organised as the ruling class), and, as rapidly as possible, to increase the total mass of productive forces.

During this period the proletariat, through its control of the state power, destroys the bourgeois productive relationships left over from the pre-revolutionary period. With them are destroyed the methods of thought which they have produced. The workers learn to think as communists, not by compulsion or by instruction but by association. In Russia this process is peculiarly difficult. During the last two years over 5½ million new workers have been absorbed into industry, most of them peasants with the peasant's individualistic outlook.

It is clearly impossible to apply to this mass, which is only learning to become a proletariat, the *communist* formula of 'From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs'. Stalin recognises this: every communist has always recognised this. The

only surprising thing is that the recognition has caused so much excitement and been so widely hailed as a retreat from communism.

Payment by results is not an invention of Stalin's. It is simply the application of the traditional *socialist* formula for the transition period, 'To each according to what he produces'. Lenin recognised this clearly:

> In the first phase of Communist Society the principle 'For an equal quantity of labour an equal quantity of products' continues to live in the capacity of regulator ... dividing labour ... among the members of society. (*State and Revolution*, p. 97)

The industrialisation of Russia, so distasteful to many people, is not communism. The tactics of the present period are not communism. They are, however, Marxist tactics designed to bring about communism in the shortest possible time. Industrialisation is desirable not for itself, but because communism is only possible in an industrial community.

When it comes, this commission will differ from the present transition period as much as or more than it differs from capitalism or capitalism from feudalism. And in the communist society itself there will be room for continual change, since the dialectical process of history will lose only its class nature and will find expression in the contest of man with his environment.

The objective of communism is not the aggrandisement but the abolition of the proletariat. Equality, which for the middle class has meant equality before the law, and for the peasants has meant equal distribution of the land, means for the workers nothing less than the abolition of classes. With the abolition, or more exactly, the disappearance of classes, the state too disappears. Then and only then will liberty be possible in the fullest sense. While more than one class exists, liberty is only possible for whichever happens to be dominant.

This process, as Lenin said, must occupy a whole historic period. The Five Year Plan is thus only the first step towards communism. It is important to note, however, that 'New Conditions: New Tasks', while it takes cognisance of certain partial failures in the Plan, is actually not the outcome of its failure but of its success. It is the collectivisation of the most important corn-growing areas, with the consequently diminished flow of

workers into the towns, the abolition of unemployment, and the huge increase in industrial production which form the 'New Conditions' referred to by Stalin. These necessitate, not a return to capitalism, but a strengthening of already existing forces and methods of production.

There remains the more fundamental question of property. On no point has the Marxist attitude been more completely misunderstood. To say that the communist is opposed to private property is as erroneous as to say that he is in favour of it. Plekhanov summarises the position as follows:

> Marx put the question upon a concrete platform. According to his doctrine the forms and relations of property are determined by the evolution of the forces of production. To one phase of evolution there corresponds a specific form of property; to another phase another form: but there is no absolute solution and cannot be one, for everything is in a flux, everything changes. (*Fundamental Problems of Marxism*, p.112)

This can be demonstrated historically. At certain stages property has been regarded as belonging to the family, at others to the clan. In the Middle Ages even the free cultivator did not regard himself as the absolute owner of the land he occupied. Among the feudal aristocracy the law of entail was a recognition that no one generation was entitled to dissipate property which was regarded as being held in trust for the future. The gradual abolition of entail was one of the most characteristic developments of capitalist society, when, for the first time in history, property came to mean exclusively private property. Gallox's ideas on the matter are clearly far more conditioned by his environment than he is aware.

There are, of course, certain forms of property that are naturally private. The toothbrush is perhaps an extreme example of this. No communist would object to the private ownership of clothes, books or furniture. There are other forms of property which come under a slightly different category. Houses today are not usually occupied by their owners. The desire of many people to 'own' a house is the result of the abolition by capitalism of the old distinction between possession and ownership, a distinction which would be restored under communism.

If a man is in possession of a house, and that possession is guaranteed so long as he does not make use of it to the

disadvantage of society, he will not normally desire to become its owner. The present desire for ownership springs entirely from the insecurity of tenure. The communist objective is to bring more and more articles of use into this category. A beginning has already been made in Russia by the extension of the social services to include such things as free theatre seats, workers' rest-houses and the provision of houses at nominal rents.

Ultimately, all members of society will be entitled to take just whatever goods and services they may consider that they need. Many people find this hard to understand, and think of it as a Utopian fantasy rather than as the only satisfactory and scientific method of distribution. I remember being told by a woman to whom I had made this statement that she would immediately take six fur coats. This is only a crude statement of a general objection which is usually expressed much more subtly. It is easy for anyone accustomed to our anarchic methods to forget that the object of wealth is use, and that we only take more than we can actually use at any given moment if we are afraid that we shall not have enough at some later date or if we wish to impress our neighbours with a sense of our wealth and importance. Since the pre-condition of communism is the production of sufficient wealth to satisfy the needs of everyone, these factors would obviously not operate.

Even allowing that 'private interest is the one force which makes for economic efficiency' it is taking far too narrow a view to deduce, as Gallox does, that 'private interest' can only be expressed by the accumulation of private property. It may also be expressed by a desire for improved material conditions of a kind not dependent upon private property. It may be expressed in a desire for more leisure and wider opportunities for culture. It may even be expressed in such superficially altruistic ways as a desire that a man's children should have the possibility of a better life than he himself enjoys. The object of economic activity is the production, not, as Gallox imagines, of property, but of wealth.

It is also true, though this may seem strange to many, that communism is a movement to secure a diffusion, even of private property, far wider than exists today. Gallox himself declares that 'the number of propertyless wage-earners is an insult to our generation', and this is simply the logical result of the existing freedom to exploit and be exploited which we call the capitalist system. Communism does not attack private property, but exactly

that property which is not private in that its possession gives one man power over the lives of others. If it is true, as Gallox seems to believe, that property is a necessary precondition to freedom he should be the last person to defend a system which makes this freedom impossible for an increasing majority of the population. Until certain changes have taken place it is idle rhetoric to declare that the stone breaker on the Brighton road is as free as the poet.

I find it a little puzzling to know just why the poet was introduced into the argument at all. Gallox draws a number of interesting parallels between the production of poetry and the production of other commodities. That certain resemblances exist, few people, and certainly no Marxist would dream of denying. But in this particular case the only effect of bringing forward the analogy was to produce illegitimately the impression that the wage-earner enjoys a freedom similar in kind, if different in quantity, to that enjoyed by the poet.

Beyond this Gallox does not take his argument. I can only suppose that he intends to deduce from the relationships of poetry and property the conclusion that the one is impossible without the other. Much that I have said about the abolition of classes, and the property relations which must exist under communism, bears directly upon this point. Since the question of poetry has been raised I wish to conclude my reply with a discussion of the position of poetry, which of course is that of the arts in general, in a communist society. The suggestions I put forward are considerably more tentative in substance than in form, since it cannot yet be said that even the beginnings of a Marxist aesthetic exist, at any rate in this country.

Poetry has always in the past been the product of a leisure class, or rather of the intellectuals of a such class. It must be remembered that the relation of a class to its intellectuals is extremely complicated, and is always liable to escape any generalisations that may be made about it.

The state of poetry is largely dependent upon the connection of the leisure class with the productive process. This connection must be close and vital, though that of the individual poet need not be, since he expresses less himself than his social environment. The great ages of poetry have been those in which the poetry-producing class was young and vigorous and was breaking through existing productive relationships. Conversely, a class without social func-

tions tends to produce decadent poetry.

At the present time poetry fully reflects the parasitic condition of the ruling class in what Lenin called the last stage of capitalism. This does not prevent much existing poetry from being individually interesting and significant. The diseased state of poetry is shown most precisely in the 'left wing' for the very reason that its poets react most sensitively to the contemporary situation. Hence we have the frantic hunt for a creative miracle set on foot in 'transition', and the Surrealist preoccupation with the mythology of dreams. In the importance which they attach to 'the word' these groups are closely akin to the Symbolists who dominated Russian literature between 1905 and 1916.

Both these movements have been anarchist rather than communist in their approach to politics. It is completely characteristic that Blok in *The Twelve* selected just the undisciplined and turbulent, and therefore impermanent, elements in the Revolution for apotheosis. Similar tendencies were expressed in writers like Pilnyak and Yessenin, and even in the near-communist poet Mayakovsky. With the ending of the civil war period this literary phase also ended, and it must be admitted that no new writers of European importance have appeared with the possible exception of Pasternak.

This seems to me natural enough. The revolution neither creates nor is intended to create a new leisure class. It is intended rather to create a leisure community, but this must be the work of a considerable period. It can hardly be seriously undertaken until the revolution has spread from Russia at least to the most advanced capitalist countries.

The revolution will work no miracles. There will be no automatic tapping of inexhaustible reservoirs of human emotion never before drawn upon. But it will create a leisure community integrally associated with the productive forces in a way in which no one class has ever been. Here, I suggest, are the preconditions for a poetry with a wider basis and deeper roots than has hitherto existed.

It is impossible to prophesy, and I have no intention of creating fanciful utopias which only invite the retort: 'How do you know?' All that it is possible to do is to show, as I have tried to do, that the logical development of the historic process is towards a form of society in which the writing of poetry will be possible.

Poets will still have their problems and difficulties, different from ours but perhaps as great. They will solve them in their own way. Paradoxically, they may easily be more individual difficulties than our own since they are less likely to concern the relationship of the poet to society, a question which, though it presents itself individually to each one, is really only an obstacle to be overcome before the difficulties proper to the poet can be approached.

Today the dialectic of the poet's position is this: subjectively he is (often) revolutionary both because he reflects the pessimism and hesitation of the bourgeoisie, and as a producer of commodities: objectively he is reactionary because of his dependence on the bourgeoisie and his isolation from the revolutionary movement of the Proletariat. Hence a choice is possible for the individual poet though not for poets as a whole. The intellectual who, today, realises that 'freedom is the consciousness of necessity' is able because of this dialectical position to identify himself with the proletariat. Whether he chooses to do so or not it seems clear that the only alternative before him is sterility and ultimate extinction.

The Criterion, 1932

Culture and Leisure

Mr Leavis, in the last number of *Scrutiny*, issued a challenge which will be, I think, very welcome to Marxists: a challenge to reflect upon, and to restate, their attitude to questions of the utmost importance. It is impossible for me to go into the greater number of the issues raised in *Under Which King, Bezonian?* but I should like to offer a few reflections upon two of them; the conceptions of culture and of leisure.

Now first of all, I think Mr Leavis is not quite correct in thinking that Marxists regard culture as the outcome of the '*methods* of production,' that is, 'the totality of productive relations'. This may seem a small, verbal point, but it really has some importance, since it has led Mr Leavis to conceive the connection as a rigidly determined, mechanical one rather than a fluid, dialectical one. Though secondary, the cultural level reached by a society at any point becomes in its turn a factor helping to determine productive relationships.

When we talk of 'bourgeois culture' we refer to the sum of the ideological superstructure characteristic of the present historical period, in which the bourgeoisie is the ruling class. This includes much that the editors of *Scrutiny* would perhaps prefer to call lack of culture. The novels of D.H. Lawrence and the methods of salesmanship described in Mr Denys Thompson's article *Advertising God* do not, indeed, seem to have much in common at first sight. A little consideration will show, however, that neither could have come into being save in an advanced industrial country and in the twentieth century. Both are perfectly natural products of the capitalist system in the period of imperialism.

There is here a possibility of an ambiguous use of the word culture, and Trotsky seems to have used it indifferently in both senses. Bourgeois culture, then, is the result of a historic process,

and cannot be accepted as uniformly valuable or rejected as entirely valueless. The purpose of *Scrutiny* seems to be to combat the harmful elements of the bourgeois 'culture complex' and to preserve what is valuable. This is entirely praiseworthy; the only question we have to ask ourselves is: what are the most hopeful means towards this end?

Is it possible, on the one hand, to purge away those elements that we find objectionable? And on the other hand, may not the proletarian revolution, while sweeping away advertising and the gutter press, destroy also the delicate flower of 'culture' in the restricted sense of that word? This seems to be the opinion of Mr Leavis, and presumably, of the editorial board of *Scrutiny*.

Here Trotsky's misleading formulations have led to a misapprehension of the nature of the transition period between capitalism and communism. The main weakness of *Literature and Revolution* is precisely its undialectical approach to this. Trotsky seems, as it were, to see capitalism on one side of a ditch and communism on the other, with the necessity to jump over, 'bearing' just so much 'culture' as can be conveniently stowed away in one's pockets. Actually, the period of proletarian dictatorship is not a ditch but a bridge, a period in which the new is growing out of the old. It is a period in which much is destroyed, but far more is it a period of enormous construction. And just as the economic structure of communist society will be built, and can only be built, on the basis of the achievements of earlier periods, so the cultural superstructure will begin with the most valuable elements of bourgeois culture. History proves that anything which is of cultural value, far from being a 'tender organic growth' possesses a quite amazing tenacity.

Among the things that will be accomplished during the proletarian dictatorship will be the education of the masses in the use of leisure, and a reorientation of outlook on the whole question of leisure and work. This will follow inevitably the growth of responsibility among the workers as members of a ruling class.

It is important here to understand just exactly what 'leisure' is. Clearly it is not merely the state of having nothing to do. No one would think of talking about leisure in connection with the unemployed. On the other hand the editors of *Scrutiny* are obviously extremely busy people whose time is of considerable value. Yet they have sufficient leisure to undertake the production

of a quarterly magazine. It seems to me that we must adopt a conception of leisure that is largely psychological. We cannot usefully speak of leisure except in the absence of all the anxieties and uncertainties that beset not merely the unemployed man but also the great majority of wage-earners. Nor can we speak of leisure until work is no longer the antithesis of living.

A leisure society, then, will not mean a society in which no one has any work to do. It will be a society in which drudgery is reduced to an absolute minimum, and in which for the most part the distinction between work and leisure has disappeared. And since men will not have to be relaxed in the intervals of toil, or doped into acquiescence in a system of organised exploitation, there will no longer be any place for the mass production novel or the tabloid press, and the arts will cease to be the preserve of a parasitic minority or of little groups of honest intellectuals attempting to order chaos with pitifully inadequate resources.

Here, and here only, is the 'organic community' which Mr Leavis and I are at one in desiring. This 'organic community' disappeared not with the coming of industrialism, but, long before, with the coming of the state. (It still exists, or has existed within living memory, in obscure corners of Melanesia and elsewhere.) I invite Mr Leavis to think things over once again, to attempt to get behind that 'Marxian blanket' (which isn't there nearly as often as he imagines), to consider the proportion of means and end, and to see whether the struggle to 'maintain the tradition of human culture' can really be carried far on a basis of ignoring the struggle of classes with which it is inseparably connected. I feel that *Scrutiny* is far too valuable a weapon against the Philistine to be left permanently in the position of the two heroes who 'wept like anything to see such quantities of sand'.

Note

Mr Morton's communication arrived too late to be explicitly referred to in the editorial note dealing with Marxist criticism. It must be left to readers to judge whether Mr Morton's points are adequately provided for in that note and elsewhere in *Scrutiny*. We need hardly say that we are grateful for such criticism as Mr Morton's.

Scrutiny, March 1933

On the Nature of the Ballad

When Bishop Percy published his *Reliques of Ancient Poetry* in 1765 he rendered a great service both to his own generation and to posterity, but he did it in a way that very largely obscured the precise nature of that service and the true character of our ballad poetry. The good Bishop was a genuine lover of the ballad but nevertheless presented his offering to the polite world a little apologetically. He found the ballad unpolished, naïve, barbarous. It led him into a land of mystery, of changing shapes and uncouth desires, of violence and enchantment. In a word, the ballad was *Romantic*, a voice from the childish past which a mature man of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment could find charming but could not but feel slightly ridiculous.

It was natural, therefore, that admiration for the ballad and a cult of the Middle Ages should become one of the hallmarks of the Romantic Revival. They were certainly the opposite of everything which the eighteenth century regarded as classical. There was nothing here of the trim form, the precisely ordered expression of the emotions, the exact measure and the contented rationalism of that age. Yet it could hardly be expected that the age should stop to consider whether it might not be the quality of its own classicism which was at fault. It was a true classicism, I think, but a partial and restricted one. It brought order into its picture of the universe by leaving out of account those things which were most calculated to disturb it: its classicism was a sophisticated classicism, but there is also an heroic classicism, and it is to this order that the finest ballads, like Homer and like the Sagas, seem to belong. It would not be far wrong, I believe, to reverse the old and still prevalent conception and to say that the ballad is the supreme type of English classical poetry and the Middle Ages the true period of English classicism.

So far we have been using words without defining them: what then is the meaning of these two much abused words, *classical* and *romantic*? I think they must be understood as implying opposed conceptions of the nature of man and of his relation to his universe. The classical view tends to accept a rigorously realistic limitation of man's powers. It sees him as placed in a harsh, difficult, cramping environment and as moulded by that environment. Man is thus and thus, it says, born to sin and suffering, driven to extremes of cruelty, passion and folly but capable also of extremes of heroism, nobility and generosity. He is a multi-coloured creature, shot through with contradictions, but, such as he is, he is still the greatest thing in his world, the eldest child of the gods.

To the romantic such a view seems mean and inadequate. He may agree that man is now such a thing as we have described, but he cannot accept this statement as final. To him man is, as it were, a prince in disguise, who may at any moment throw aside his rags and reveal himself in his true splendour. He and his world are capable of unlimited expansion and transformation. It would take us too far to attempt to assess the ultimate value and correctness of these rival views, though each would seem to have its own truth. Each, also, has its own danger. The classicist is apt to acquiesce too readily with things as they are, to accept a purely static view of the world, the romantic to drift away upon clouds of vague and comfortable optimism, to see man as he may become and to forget present realities. But it can easily be seen that tragic poetry will tend to be classical, that this conception lies at the heart of the ballad and is, indeed the dominant note of the Middle Ages. Nor is it difficult to see why this must be so, since the rudeness of the prevailing mode of production made it impossible for man to control his environment and therefore impressed upon him a most rigorous sense of human limitations.

There is a strip of bare, hilly country, running from Newcastle to Edinburgh and from Berwick to Carlisle. Across it runs an ill-defined frontier. On each side a rough people, cattle graziers and cattle thieves, peasants and petty nobility, with one or two great families whose names recur constantly. Across this border a permanent guerrilla war rages, criss-crossed with private vendettas which take no account of frontiers. A people hardy, independent, accustomed of necessity to the use of arms, loyal to their friends

and treating every one else as enemies, in some ways barely emerging from the tribal form of society. Life for them is hard, poor, stirring, passionate, bloody, subject to sudden triumph and disaster. Man has to snatch with both hands at his luck and happiness and may only too often find himself stripped of both by evil fate. Fate seems to rule all things, and against his fate no man can prevail. In such a society man cannot afford to be romantic, to indulge in illusions about himself.

This is the country and the people of the ballads. It would be incorrect to describe such a society as classless, but there was a kind of rough equality since a man was what he was largely by virtue of the strength of his hands and the quickness of his wits. And even if class divisions existed, class oppression was much less evident than the universal oppression of harsh necessity, the prevailing poverty, the barrenness of the earth, the reiving and raiding that were part of the life of a wild border country. Consequently, society was far more of a piece than anything we can well imagine today. Joys and fears, hopes and doubts, deeds and beliefs were largely common to all, and the poetry in which these were expressed is therefore curiously democratic for all that it treats mainly, as was indeed inevitable, of the doings of outstanding figures. For these figures are, indeed, not merely outstanding but also typical, the expression of universal experience raised to a higher power. They represented the people in the same sort of way in which the king represented the people in the days when kingship was arising from tribal magic and tribal warfare.

Therefore the ballad was anonymous. We do not know the name of the author of even a single ballad and no one has ever succeeded in copying the ballad form in such a way that the forgery was not instantly obvious. Such is the anonymity of the ballad that we do not even know when or how it was composed. Scholars still debate, without any sign of reaching a conclusion, the question as to whether the ballads were the work of professional bards or of a sort of co-operative folk song-shop. Probably the truth lies somewhere between these extremes. Clearly there is a great difference between the spirit of the ballads and that of the earlier skald-made sagas, which were aristocratic in feeling and served to embody the traditions and pedigrees of the great families. And there is a homogeneity in ballad literature, a common spirit and

style, which makes the greatest and the meanest ballads unmistakably akin and unmistakably different from any other thing on earth, and which can only be the result of a common shaping of familiar matter, a common experience of living. So that, as Professor Childe has said,

> though they do not write themselves, though a man and not a people has composed them, still the author counts for nothing, and it is not by a mere accident, but with the best reasons that they have come down to us anonymous.

Perhaps we can most safely conclude that the bards who made the ballads were at least as close to the masses as they were to the nobility, that they worked, often, at familiar tales and told them in a style that had become obligatory, that the ballads quickly became common property, passing from mouth to mouth and, no doubt, both losing and gaining in the process, and that, in short, there was a sort of partnership between poet and people in which each partner was indispensable to the other. While we must agree that a man and not a people made the ballads, modern knowledge of, for example, cowboy songs, sea shanties and negro spirituals, gives grounds for supposing that the positive part played by the people in shaping ballad poetry may have been greater than was at one time imagined.

The result was, at the best, a great and democratic tragic poetry. There is of course a mass of ballads of little consequence, crude narratives which barely serve their original purpose of passing away a dull evening. But there is a residuum, perhaps twenty or thirty complete ballads and a quantity of scattered passages, stanzas and lines, which can bear comparison with any poetry in any language.

And first of all, as I have said, this is a tragic poetry, reflecting a life in which tragedy was never far distant. It has the austere, the classical regard for necessity, and no one is ever let off anything. Man is as he is and all his virtues as well as his vices are recorded and passed over and cannot turn from him his appropriate fate. In 'Edom o'Gordon' there is a moment which raised the ballad from the rank of the better type of narratives of border forays and places it alongside 'Clark Saunders' and 'Childe Waters'. Gordon had set fire to the house he was attacking and its lady had tried to

drop her daughter over the wall to safety. Gordon killed her and then suddenly realised the horror of what he had done:

> Then wi' his spear he turned her owre:
> O gin her face was wane!
> He said 'Ye are the first that e'er
> I wished alive again.'
>
> He turned her owre and owre again
> O gin her skin was white!
> 'I might have spared that bonny face
> To hae been some man's delight.'
>
> 'Busk and bown, my merry men a'
> For ill dooms do I guess,
> I cannot look in that bonnie face
> As it lies on the grass.'

Here, at its highest, is what the ballad can best do: a profound emotion and a completely visualised picture presented at the same time by the bare description of a couple of actions and a few quite ordinary words. The romantic poet might have been tempted to make this the centre of his theme: the classical, tragic poet of the ballad makes his point and passes on. Gordon's repentance and conviction of sin are accepted along with his violence and cruelty as part of a complex whole, and they cannot avert that fate which we feel with the poet to be just and necessary. Similarly, in 'Jellon Grame', it is Grame's one generous and pitiful act which finally brings about his destruction, and, again, we accept this as just and inevitable.

Pity and terror, joy and horror and pride are found everywhere in full measure in the ballads: but rarely, in the best period, contentment or disgust or resignation or sentimentality. The ballads accept life with all its misery and man with all his frailty, but they accept them heroically with a pride and a clear-eyed materialism which refuses to be satisfied with comfortable pretences and evasions. This pride and this clarity of vision can perhaps be best seen in the grandest of all the ballads, 'Clark Saunders'. Here the tragedy of Saunders and Margaret moves steadily forward line by line from their deliberate sin to its punishment:

> When in and came her seven brothers
> Wi' torches burning bright:

They said, 'We hae but one sister,
And behold her lying with a knight!'

to her sorrow and scornful defiance:

Then in and came her father dear;
Said 'Let a' your mourning be:
I'll carry the dead corse to the clay,
And I'll come back and comfort thee.'

'Comfort weel your seven sons,
For comforted I will never be:
I ween 'twas neither knave nor loon
Was in the bower last night wi' me.'

Saunders' ghost comes to Margaret in the night:

'O cocks are crowing on merry middle earth,
I wot the wild fowl are boding day,
Give me my faith and troth again,
And let me fare upon my way.'

She does so, and then, at the conclusion, comes the strangest turn of all. Nothing, the poet seems to say, is absolute or eternal. Even tragedy has its end, love passes like sorrow and the heart cannot always remember.

And fair Marg'ret and rare Marg'ret,
And Marg'ret, o' veritie,
Gin e'er ye love another man,
Ne'er love him as ye did me.

Rarely is there any deviation from the tragic pattern, and even when a happy ending is tacked on to the story it is of minor importance. 'Childe Waters' and 'Fair Annie' almost alone among the great ballads have such endings and in each case what is important is the spirit and courage in which suffering and neglect are endured, and the happy ending is perhaps only a sort of accidental sequel to their triumph of spirit.

Ellen, in 'Childe Waters', is got with child, threatened with desertion and treated with every sort of unkindness. Her lover says scornfully:

But my hounds shall eat of the bread of wheat,
And you of the bread of bran;
And you shall curse the heavy hour
That ever your love began.

But my hound shall drink of the good red wine,
And you of the water wan,
And you will sigh and say, 'Alas,
That ever I loved a man!'

... O, I will drink of the wan water,
And eat of the bread of bran;
And aye will I bless the happy hour
That ever I loved a man.'

After this it seems irrelevant and even impertinent that Childe Waters should reconsider the matter and decide to marry her. The victory had been won already.

Similarly in 'Fair Annie', the story of the discarded mistress when her lover brings home a bride whose wedding feast she must prepare:

And aye she served the lang tables
Wi' the white bread and the brown,
And aye she turned her round about,
Sae fast the tears ran down.

She took a napkin lang and white
And hung it on a pin;
It was to wash away her tears,
As she gaed out and in.

We have here no elaborate account of her feelings, that is not the way of the ballad: instead, the whole breaking of a heart is implied in one simple action.

This again is in the classical tradition, the tradition of restraint and simple direct statement, and the ballads are always concerned with the direct account of action, with brief and vivid pictures, with dialogue pared down to the bone. It is a hard way, deliberately eschewing ornament and imagery and many obvious effects, but followed to the end it has its own reward. What is lost in breadth is gained in intensity. In saying less than it appears to say the ballad succeeds in saying more. Words are used with such simplicity that they acquire unexpected subtleties. Out of the barrenness of diction an uncovenanted richness flowers: because nothing is wasted everything counts for more than itself.

I'll show you where white lilies grow
On the banks of o'Italie

('The Daemon Lover')

or

The carline queen was stark and strang
She gar'd the door flee aff the ban

('Cospatrick')

or

They brought him in to Carlisle Castle
To be at my Lord Scrope's commands

('Kinmount Willie')

or

'Hold up, hold up, Lord William' she says
'For I fear that you are slain' –
''Tis naething but the shadow of my scarlet cloak,
That shines in the water sae plain'

('The Douglas Tragedy')

are typical examples in varying keys of this vivid richness in simplicity. And because, like all heroic poetry, the ballad is anonymous and unselfconscious it is able to secure effects with an ease which would otherwise be impossible.

At ilka tett o' her horse's mane
Hung fifty sillar bells and nine.

Here the simple number and the word 'silver' are all that is needed. Elsewhere words like 'velvet', 'gold' or 'scarlet', which any poet today would think several times before using at all, and would probably only use in some rather unusual sense or context, are able to create an actually physical sense of magnificence. It is perhaps because such simple means suffice to produce such an atmosphere of magic (in the sense of conjuring up a world apparently governed absolutely by its own laws and logic) that the ballads so deceived Bishop Percy and have contrived to deceive multitudes in each succeeding generation.

We are all ready enough to be deceived in such matters. The

world of the ballads is so alien to our own that we find it hard to grasp it as a living reality. It is easier to romanticise it, to invest it with a charm and a quaintness which never belonged to it. But so long as we continue to think of the ballads as quaint or charming or as having a mainly antiqurian interest, we shall fail to understand them, to our own great loss. We can *only* understand them by approaching them as great poems in their own right, as being among the most splendid achievements of our nation. This is not, of course, to say that we must not approach them historically, must not try to discover the actual, historical world which they mirror. Like all poetry they reflect the age and place of origin from which they sprang, but not directly, not without distortion. The richness of the ballads, for example, is often a reflection of actual poverty (only to a poor community could the silver bells on the queen of Elfland's horse sound so impressive). The magic often reflects ignorance and a desperate effort to cheat fate by some ruse which the heart knows cannot succeed. The courtesy and fine manners often cloak a savage barbarity, as in the finely ironic ballad of 'Little Musgrave and Lady Barnard'.

What the ballads show is not a rich or a glamorous or a highly cultured society, but one which is poor and wild and rude and bowed beneath the uncomprehended laws of necessity. But it is not an ignoble society. It is a society where life can exist at a high level of intensity, where the knowledge that no man can escape his fate makes all the more remarkable his resolution in meeting it unflinchingly. In the ballads we can see, if we will, both the special conditions which created them, and also that which is permanent and unchanging and peculiarly precious in men, their will to endure and to contend with their environment, even in circumstances in which the nature of things could seem to be most fittingly summed up in the epitaph of the dead mossrider:

> Mony a one of him makes mane,
> But nane sall ken whar he is gane:
> O'er his white banes, when they are bare,
> The wind sall blaw for evermair.

1942, reprinted in *Language of Men*

The Madness of Swift

In writing about Swift it seems inevitable that we should begin at the end: we can forget the wit and the lionised pamphleteer; we pass mercifully over the years of exile; we will return presently to the Irish patriot, but the image which first occurs to our memory is that of the splendid machine thrown out of gear and racing itself to destruction. And, in some unexplained moment of clarity towards the close, composing the superb epitaph which stands to-day in St Patrick's Cathedral:

> Here is laid [I translate roughly] the body of Jonathan Swift, where savage indignation will tear his heart no longer. Go hence, traveller, and imitate, if you can, one who always fought hard for human freedom.

Here, in the combination of the savage indignation (the force lies in the adjective at least as much as in the noun) and the fighter for human freedom, lies the essential truth and the essential contradiction about Swift. How are we to reconcile the man who wrote the *Drapier's Letters*,

> to refresh and continue that *Spirit* so seasonably raised amongst you, and to let you see that by the Laws of GOD, OF NATURE, of NATIONS and of your own country you are and ought to be as FREE a People as your Brethren in *England*, (Swift's emphasis)

with the man who declared through Gulliver that,

> when I began to consider that by copulating with one of the *Yahoo* species I had become a parent of more, it struck me with the utmost shame, confusion and horror ...?

Yet reconciled they must be, and I think that a first step towards this reconciliation is an understanding of Swift's madness.

On this subject the doctors and the psychologists have had much

to say and their diagnosis is, no doubt, interesting and important – yet I think there is something else to be said. For Swift's madness, like the madness of Ruskin, was not merely an individual pathological breakdown. It was also a social act, the final protest of a spirit that could protest no other way.

Swift was one of those rare persons, fortunate or unfortunate according to your point of view, who cannot deceive themselves, for whom injustice and oppression and cruelty *are* injustice and oppression and cruelty and not social necessities or the workings of inscrutable providence, and to whom the decent coverings with which most of us hide the truth about our world and our actions in it are not only unconvincing but hateful, more hateful perhaps than the horrors they were intended to conceal.

'Last week,' he wrote, 'I saw a woman flayed, and you will hardly believe how much it altered her person for the worse.' Swift believed in justice and fair dealing: he found only injustice and oppression and the wicked flourishing like the green bay tree. Gradually he failed to see any hope of a remedy. He had followed a familiar path: like More he had attempted to instruct the rulers till a sudden turn in the political game had thrown him, a discredited exile, into his Dublin deanery. He had tried to arouse the decent and patriotic feelings of the Anglo-Irish gentry till, convinced that they had neither, he wrote in his *Modest Proposal* – the ironic scheme for the ending of Irish poverty by the slaughter of the children of the peasantry for the tables of the rich –

> I grant the food will be somewhat dear, and therefore very *proper for landlords* who, as they have already devoured most of the parents seem to have the best Title to the Children. (Swift's emphasis)

And now, to whom should he go? To the middle class? Perhaps, for his campaign against Wood's Halfpence had shown them not unresponsive. But he was too keen-sighted not to realise how limited was their power, either for good or evil. To whom then? To the 'Savage old Irish?' That was unthinkable, they were too ignorant, too brutalised by ages of misery, and the only hope he could see for them, and that a poor one, was in a more enlightened policy by their masters and an end of the national oppression that was turning Ireland into a desert.

Every way was closed. Folly and wickedness ruled the world and nothing could be done about it. The hard fight was over, the

savage indignation and the torn heart remained. Since indifference was impossible to Swift so long as his understanding held, the torment of the insoluble problem grew ever more unbearable till in the end the overtaxed mind slid over the edge into the abyss of madness. And Stella had died, Stella whom he had known and loved since she was a girl and he a brilliant unhappy young man in the house of Sir William Temple, Stella his pupil and friend and confidant. At this point Swift's public and private problems meet and overlap one another. He was born to dominate, yet could not but despise those who submitted to his dominion; he must have affection and applause, but struck out in savage terror when those he loved sought closer contact or tried to invade his privacy. The Swift who rode the high horse with Bolingbroke and killed Vanessa with a look was the same as he who fought hard for the human freedom of the contemptible race of Yahoos.

Only Stella, Esther Johnson, was able to establish a firm and intimate relationship with him. And this only by a miracle of abnegation, patience and understanding, by a deliberate self-subordination and a refusal to make demands. He seems to have loved her as he loved no one else and there must have been moments in secret when he dreamed of an even closer relationship, only to recoil with the old, morbid horror of Gulliver 'when I consider ...' This horror also was an essential part of Swift's make-up, and if not the cause of his madness at least determined its character. But the madness has another notable feature. Because it was a social act as well as a morbid condition it tended, in the earlier stages at least, to sharpen his irony, to intensify his vision and even to strengthen his understanding. His social criticism, up to the point where a total disequilibrium was reached, became keener and deeper. This can easily be seen by a glance at the development of his work.

The first Swift (*Tale of a Tub*, c. 1696) is a brilliant young man delighting in his power, almost indifferent to the thing said in the exuberance of its expression. This period may be said to end about 1708 with the pamphlet on *The Abolishing of Christianity in England*. Then comes the period of high politics, with *The Conduct of the Allies* (1711) as its peak. Here, it may be said, Swift was writing as a political hack of the Tories. In a superficial sense this is true, but we have to look a little below the surface. Swift's pen was never for sale and if he wrote for a party it was because

that party, at that moment, seemed to stand for things which he passionately believed. The Tory policy coincided with his hatred of war, which he believed to be incompatible with human dignity as a method of settling disputes, and with his strong dislike of the new power of the loan capitalists which the Revolution of 1688 had introduced into England:

> all that Sett of People who are called the *Monied* Men; such as had raised vast sums by Trading with Stocks and Funds, and Lending upon great Interest and Praemiums; whose perpetual Harvest is War, and whose beneficial way of Traffick must very much decline by a Peace.

If the reasons for Swift's dislikes were reactionary, the prejudices of an old-fashioned English gentleman who thought that the landed interest, upon which the prosperity of the country ultimately rested, was threatened by the Monied Men, the dislikes themselves and his expression of them were entirely honest and decent.

This career as a pamphleteer ended abruptly in 1714 when the death of Queen Anne ruined the Tory party. He was forced to retire to Dublin – 'the wretched dirty dog-hole and prison'. For nearly ten years he brooded in silence, browbeating his Chapter and levying war upon the Irish bishops mainly because they were his superiors and because he had been disappointed in his hopes of a mitre. His life seemed to be ended, but Swift, wherever he found himself, must fight and dominate and in the affair of Wood's Halfpence he found a new battlefield. In itself it was a small matter – the granting of a patent to an obscure individual to coin small change for Ireland and make a more than handsome profit thereby. But for Swift it raised the whole question of the nationhood of Ireland (by which he understood primarily the English in Ireland), a subject upon which he had already begun to meditate, as witness his *A Proposal for the Universal Use of Irish Manufacture, in Cloaths and Furniture of Houses, etc., Utterly Renouncing Every Thing Wearable that Comes from England* (1720). His famous exhortation to 'burn everything English except their coals' makes him in a sense the father of De Valera's policy of economic nationalism.

Finally, with the *Modest Proposal* (1729) we enter the period of torment and approaching madness. Yet this pamphlet and *A Short View of Ireland* (1728) reach a new high point of social criticism.

Here Swift contemplates the lot of the mass of the Irish peasantry. He compares Ireland to

> an Hospital, where all the Household Officers grew Rich, while the poor for whose sake it was built were almost starving for want of Food and Raiment.

Hereafter a decline begins, though there are still occasional flashes like the *Verses Upon the Death of Dr Swift* (1731). But for the most part the periods of relative freedom from pain were spent in involved diatribes against servants or the composition of the eighteenth-century equivalents of crossword puzzles. From 1738 to his death in 1745 the breakdown is almost complete.

We can trace the same progression in a single masterpiece, *Gulliver's Travels*, which lies right across the central part of Swift's life. In such a work, which though short, sums up his whole outlook over twelve years, it would be vain to expect consistency, and it is much more valuable to disentangle the various strands and attempts to *explain* the inconsistencies. Here I am much in debt to Sir Charles Firth's brilliant paper *The Political Significance of Gulliver's Travels*.

The book as a whole is Swift's excursion into the realm of Utopia. Yet it is not one utopia but four, and these of very different kinds: negative, positive and mixed. The social criticism, that is to say, takes the form both of a direct satirical picture of human, and especially English and Irish, affairs, and of criticism by the construction of polities in which our errors are avoided. In some places these elements exist side by side and even seem to contradict one another.

Much of the First Book was written in 1714, before the retreat to Dublin. This is, comparatively, light-hearted fooling. How childish and little, Swift argues, are our political differences, our wars, our conception of human dignity and grandeur. In the main this is a *negative* utopia, satirising in general terms the political life of England in which Swift was then immersed. But it was filled out about 1720 with two new elements, a veiled account of the fall of Bolingbroke written with a bitter hardness and an account of certain Lilliputian laws and customs relating especially to education and justice. These have a *positive* utopian character quite inconsistent with the remainder of the Book: they are obviously an undigested afterthought.

The Third Book was also partly written in 1714 and these early chapters are again in lighter vein, satirising, in the projects of the Academy of Balnibarbi, Newton and scientists and philosophers in general. But later additions, born of an extended residence in Ireland, give a sombre background to the amiable follies of the Academicians:

> I never knew a soil so unhappily cultivated, houses so ill contrived and so ruinous, or a people whose countenance and habit expressed so much misery and want.

Here is a description of contemporary Ireland, and for this misery Swift supplies the explanation – the exploitation and domination of the country by the flying island of Laputa. The name, La Puta, means simply The Whore and expresses the relation of England to Ireland, in which the ruling country drains from the dependant all its wealth:

> whereby he can deprive them of the benefits of the sun and rain, and consequently afflict the inhabitants with death and disaster.

Finally, and I think this is clearly a late addition, this Third Book contains the revolting account of the Struldbrugs, the people who cannot die. Already the horror of living death was menacing Swift. Long before, he had said, 'I shall be like that tree, I shall die at the top.' He never feared death:

> It is impossible that anything so natural, so necessary and so universal as death, should have been designed by providence as an evil to mankind.

But now he had come to look upon death with longing and would part from his friends with the words 'Good night; I hope I shall never see you again.' The fate which he dreaded, and which finally came upon him, was that of outliving his faculties, and of that he draws a picture 'to arm our people [and himself?] against the fear of death'. This desire for death is also a part of the savage indignation of the fighter who realises that his struggle has been in vain.

To turn back to the Second Book is to enter a simpler and lighter world: it was written probably about or soon after 1720 – well before the Fourth Book and the additions to the Third.

Brobdingnag is not without some of faults of grossness, but in the main it is a positive utopia. It is a land of rough plenty, of well tilled fields and simple laws, of peace and reasonable government and the antique virtues dear to Swift's Toryism. It was also a logical sequel to Lilliput and not only because the scale of measurement is precisely inverted: in Lilliput Swift insisted upon the littleness of man, and this theme is repeated when the King of Brobdingnag declares:

> I cannot but conclude the bulk of your natives to be the most pernicious race of little odious vermin that nature ever suffered to crawl upon the surface of the earth.

But Swift has not yet despaired of his kind. The moral of this Second Book seems to be that man would do well enough if he were bigger – mentally, morally and spiritually as well as bodily – and that a return to a simpler life in which honest yeomen cultivated the soil and honest tradesmen and citizens supplied their needs would provide a sufficiency of happiness.

In the Fourth Book Swift explicitly abandons this position. The utopia here is a non-human one, a polity of horses. As if to say that mere size is of no account, that man is beyond all hope and that only a totally new species will serve. The utopia of horses is a moral utopia, marked by its extreme simplicity, so that already we seem to be treading on the ground of the Rousseauesque Romantics, returning not only to the noble savage but beyond him into a more biologically specialised world. The horse is nobler than man because he has few wants, less organisation, has not developed a civilisation in which vices are inevitable. The Houynhnms eat only oats and milk, do not understand the nature of a lie and their culture is roughly parallel with that of the Neolithic Age. They have further, and this bears directly upon Swift's own peculiarities, a curious coldness in their personal relationships: they have benevolence but not affections:

> they have no fondness for their colts or foals, but the care they take in educating them proceeds, entirely from the display of reason ... Courtship, love, presents, jointure, settlements, have no place in their thoughts ... the young couples meet and are joined merely because it is the determination of their parents and friends.

In case there should be any mistake this coldly perfect society is contrasted directly with the beastliness of the Yahoos, the degenerate representatives of the human race. Here we are again in the world of the *Modest Proposal*, for the Yahoos are not only man in general but the 'savage old Irish' in particular, the product of centuries of want, oppression and ignorance. Once again, Swift had been using his eyes. He had seen the peasants:

> who pay great Rents, living in Filth and Nastiness upon Butter-milk and Potatoes, without a Shoe or Stocking upon their Feet, or a House so convenient as an *English* hog-sty to receive them. (*Short View*)

Yet the Irish, unlike the Yahoos, are not degraded by nature or beyond hope, and Swift at this time reaches the greatest clarity as to the causes of their condition:

> these defects, wherever they happen, arising only from the poverty and slavery they suffer from their inhuman neighbours, and the base and corrupt spirits of too many of the chief gentry ... The millions of oppressions they lie under, the tyranny of their landlords and the general misery of the whole nation have been enough to damp the best spirits under the sun.

Irish poverty, like her other troubles, was not inevitable, but Swift began to despair of preaching remedies.

In the *Modest Proposal* he writes bitterly:

> Therefore let no man talk to me of other Expedients: of taxing our Absentees at five Shillings a pound: of using neither cloaths nor household Furniture, except what is of our own Growth and Manufacture ... of being a little Cautious not to sell our Country and our Consciences for nothing: of teaching Landlords to have at least one degree of Mercy towards their Tenants. Lastly of putting a Spirit of Honesty, Industry and Skill into our Shopkeepers.

He was even able, at times, to look objectively at his own rage and despair, as when he wrote to Bolingbroke in 1729:

> I find myself disposed every year, or rather every month to be more angry and revengeful; and my rage is so ignoble that it descends even to resent the folly and baseness of the enslaved people among whom I live.

How nearly Swift, as the shadows begin to close upon him, becomes an Irish patriot instead of an Anglo-Irish one!

But the shadows *were* closing, and this is best seen in the dual

nature of his Yahoos: the two themes, that of the Irish patriot condemning national oppression and that of the misanthrope in despair before the folly and wickedness of the human race are now so interwoven that neither we nor Swift can say where one begins and the other ends. His fight for human freedom was nearly over: he could see little around him but ruin and disaster, yet he did not abandon the struggle so long as his sanity remained.

Today the same battle continues, but we have a hope and a confidence which Swift never knew, so that our fight is easier than his. To fight with victory clear before us is a light thing – to fight without expectation of victory, without even the possibility of victory, was the work of a superman, and the miracle of Swift is not that he was maimed and maddened in the struggle, but simply that he fought.

1943, reprinted in *Language of Men*

Mr Crusoe and Mr Gulliver

No documentary evidence has survived, but it is hard not to believe that Mr Crusoe was one of that 'concourse of curious people' who visited Mr Gulliver's house at Rotherhithe in or about the year 1715. The two greatest travellers of the age must surely have met somewhere, and Mr Crusoe, though well on in his eighties, was not the kind of man to miss any chance of investigating a marvel. Yet the meeting can hardly have been satisfactory to either party. Even if Mr Gulliver had so far overcome his prejudice against the Yahoo race as to allow himself to be interviewed, the older traveller with his ingrained matter-of-factness must have found some of the details of Mr Gulliver's adventures hard to accept. Horses, indeed, might somewhere be found capable of reason, but could the most reasonable of horses thread a needle? And Mr Gulliver, so well known for his inability to speak the thing that is not, would doubtless resent the faintest reflection upon the absolute truth of any of his narrations.

It may be for this reason that the meeting passed unrecorded, that both parties preferred to be silent about a total failure to establish contact in any common basis of experience. For certain it is that no two men, so superficially similar, can have travelled the earth at roughly the same time and discovered two earths so entirely different. At first sight the similarities are most striking:

> My father had a small estate in Nottinghamshire; I was the third of five sons ...
>
> I was born in the year 1632 in the City of York of a good family ... Being the third Son of the Family, and not bred to any trade, my Head began to be filled very early with rambling Thoughts ...

Who, without referring to the books, will be certain which was Crusoe and which was Gulliver?

Indeed, two more ordinary Englishmen of the middle class it would be hard to find: this ordinariness is in fact the guarantee of absolute truth of what they have to tell us about themselves. And these two ordinary men shared an unexplained passion, a compulsion one might almost say, for roving, for seeking their fortunes at the corners of the earth; which, also, was a characteristic common to thousands of the younger sons of middle class English families in the seventeenth century and since. And both of them left us narratives of their voyages that are monuments of plain, honest, middle-class English prose – yet the things they have to tell us are farther removed than the poles, as remote from each other as earth from heaven or as earth from hell. It may be worth our while to enquire into the reasons for this.

Perhaps at this point it is time to stop pretending, to admit that Mr Crusoe and Mr Gulliver are not real persons, but creatures of the imagination, the creations respectively of Daniel Defoe, dissenting merchant, journalist and citizen of London, and of the Revd Jonathan Swift, vicar of Laracor and later Dean of St Patrick's in Dublin. What they have to discover for us is simply the two worlds as seen by the two supreme writers of the final period of the bourgeois revolution in England. We should therefore begin by clearing our minds as to what exactly was involved in the 'Revolution' of 1688 and what it meant for Defoe and for Swift.

Strictly speaking, it was not a revolution at all. The decisive shift of power had happened a generation earlier when Cromwell and the New Model Army had proved in practice that the bourgeoisie, when it chose to put forth its power, was the strongest force in the state. The Restoration of 1660 had not disproved this: it had merely established a working compromise based on the existing strengths of the various propertied classes, and the 'Revolution' of 1688 only marked the defeat of a reactionary and foredoomed attempt to upset this compromise. It is true that 1688 was not an exact return to the 1660 situation, because in the meantime the balance of forces had somewhat changed. But it is equally true, and far more important, that it was not a true revolution in the sense that power was transferred from one class to another.

Its effect was to increase the wealth and influence of the merchants and manufacturers, to develop rapidly banking, the

national debt and all the machinery of large-scale financial operations, to create the conditions for the opening of a world market for English goods and for a widespread colonial empire, and, in the long run, for the complete destruction of the peasantry and for the coming of the industrial revolution.

Defoe may, without exaggeration, be called the representative man of 1688. Twice he was under arms: first in the ill-fated Monmouth rising and afterwards when William of Orange landed at Torbay. William was to him the Protestant Hero, the model of a people's king, the guarantor of civil and religious liberties, the Saviour of England from 'Popery and Wooden Shoes'. However Defoe's exact party alignment might alter in the shifting of the extremely complicated political struggles of the next 25 years, his guiding line was an absolute adherence to the principles of 1688. That is to say, in general, Defoe was a Whig, even if his views did not always coincide with those of the leaders of the Whig party at any given moment. He was a satisfied acceptor of the existing compromise.

Equally, and equally in spite of similar reservations, Swift was a Tory. He accepted 1688 – the point about 1688 was that *everyone* accepted it except a handful of irreconcilables – but he accepted it grudgingly and with regret. He was an *unsatisfied* acceptor. More clearly than Defoe, who saw only the surface features – the triumph of civil and religious liberty and the prospect of increasing trade and prosperity – Swift understood the deeper implications and disliked them exceedingly. He distrusted the new power of wealth, saw in the Bank of England only an instrument of misgovernment, foresaw in the rise of capitalism the impoverishment of the countryside. Above all, he hated the new policy of colonial expansion and the brutal methods by which it was brought about. So Gulliver excuses himself for having neglected to annex any of his discovered lands:

> To say the truth, I had conceived a few scruples with regard to the distributive justice of princes upon these occasions. For instance, a crew of pirates are driven by a storm they know not whither; at length a boy discovers land from the topmast; they go ashore to rob and plunder; they see a harmless people, are entertained with kindness, they give the country a new name ... Here commences a new dominion acquired with a title of *divine right*. Ships are sent with the first opportunity; the natives are driven out or destroyed, their princes tortured to discover their gold; a free licence given to all acts of

> inhumanity and lust, the earth reeking with the blood of its inhabitants: and this execrable crew of butchers employed in so pious an operation, is a *modern colony* sent to convert and civilise an idolatrous and barbarous people.

And he adds, with an irony even more telling and characteristic than his indignation:

> But this description, I confess, doth by no means affect the British nation, who may be an example to the whole world for their wisdom, care and justice in planting colonies.

Swift, we must remember, by the time this was written, had begun to feel and to write as an Irishman, and Ireland, England's first colony, had experienced every horror of colonisation even within the memory of men then alive. He was writing, moreover, in a country ruined, enslaved and devastated, which was reached by none of the profits and blessings of the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688. Defoe, on the contrary, was English of the English, and England at the beginning of the eighteenth century was in many ways a tolerable place to live in. For the merchants and manufacturers and substantial farmers it was more than tolerable. Profits were high, there was a steady increase in material prosperity, all the values by and for which they stood were clearly in the ascendant. And even for the lower classes, with all the filth, brutality and squalor which certainly existed, there was in the main a rough security such as they had not enjoyed, for example, under the Tudors, and would certainly not enjoy once the Industrial Revolution and the new wave of Enclosures were fairly started. So that Defoe may well be excused a certain smugness as he travelled up and down the country noting the growth of towns and the well tilled fields, the new houses and workshops rising everywhere, the yearly increasing fleets leaving the harbours.

Defoe was not only an Englishman, but also a typical bourgeois of the best type, with the characteristic bourgeois merits and shortcomings. Honest, straightforward, independent, industrious (his amazing literary output amid a life of the most varied activities is equalled only by that of Cobbett), genuinely pious in a matter of fact way, apt to mistake the surface appearance for the reality, ready to accept as absolute truth and justice that which accorded with the interests of his class, declaring wealth to be unimportant and the 'middle station' the only true happiness, yet never missing

a legitimate opportunity to make money, he was, in his personal life and character, the exact replica which he claimed to be of his own Crusoe.

Crusoe is the essential bourgeois man, both on and off his island. To take one revealing example, his attitude to land. For him, and we must remember this was a relatively new standpoint, land was property, simply and absolutely. So naturally he regards himself as king, or, more properly, owner of his island, whether resident or no. When he was rescued he left behind him a number of men – Spaniards and English – who at first cultivated parts of the island communally. When he returned some years later he found that various difficulties had arisen and

> that there might not be quarrels afterwards about this situation ... I caused to be drawn up and signed and sealed by them ... setting out the Bounds and Situation of every Man's Plantation, and testifying that I gave them thereby severally a right to the whole Possession and Inheritance of their respective Plantations ... reserving all the rest of the Island as my own property and a certain Rent for every particular Plantation after eleven Years.

What was done, in fact, was something very like both the plantation of a colony and an Act of Enclosure.

If Defoe was typically English and bourgeois, Swift was equally, if less typically, Irish and aristocrat. His social origins, as member of a family of country clergy, were those of an adherent to the aristocracy, and Swift's early years as secretary to Sir William Temple were entirely in this tradition. But Swift himself was no man to be a hanger-on to the great – he had the temper and quality of a genuine aristocrat and soon asserted his claims to be regarded as a power in his own right. His imperiousness, his pride, the patriarchal relations he established with his servants, his friends and, finally, with the whole people of Ireland, his extravagant generosity which was largely a desire to appear out of the clouds as a godlike benefactor (though he was capable also of an extreme delicacy on occasions), his very buffoonery, were all aristocratic qualities, as were his misery and despair in an age when the aristocracy had lost its monopoly of power and was only able to survive by accepting the new social order and itself becoming bourgeois. This was something that Swift, more aristocratic than the aristocracy in his self-made grandeur, could never bring

himself to do, so that he suffered in his person the whole historic doom which in the case of his class was mitigated and transformed.

Since Defoe and Swift *were* Crusoe and Gulliver, it is now possible, I think, to see that the wandering impulse which drove them around the world was by no means the same, but, rather, exactly opposite.

Crusoe's restlessness was that of an advancing capitalism. He went out, as thousands actually did, to explore and exploit the world now lying open. He was the rugged individualist, blazing trails and founding colonies, always seeking new avenues of profit. And what he sought he found because it was actually there. Further, what he found was exactly what he left behind, the thrusting bourgeois England of his age which he carried with him and extended over the face of the earth, the world where the industrious, practical man will always succeed, the bourgeois God who helps those who help themselves. Till in the end he returns to his starting point, old and satisfied with himself and his world, but still untired, and preparing for that death which for him is only 'a longer journey than all these'.

Gulliver, too, is driven out by an inner compulsion. For him, as for Swift, the England he has known, if only in imagination, is dead and finished. He wanders aimlessly, hoping that what has been destroyed at home may exist beyond the seas. But he is seeking for a dream, for a past which even as a past is an illusion. So, though no sea is untravelled and no land unexplored, he too finds, since Swift was the most honest and historically sensitive of writers, nothing but what he left at home. He finds not security and happiness but only a darkness peopled with uncouth forms and the pit of hell opening under his feet at each new step.

1943, reprinted in *Language of Men*

Charles Churchill: The Bear with the Ragged Staff

Those to whom Churchill is known at all will perhaps remember him best as he appears in Hogarth's print:

> The Bruiser, C. Churchill, (once the Rev.) in the Character of a Russian Hercules, regaling himself after having killed the monster Caricatura, that so sorely galled his virtuous friend, the heaven-born Wilkes.

Here he is depicted as a bear, shambling but powerful, clothed in tattered finery with the remains of a clerical gown hanging from his shoulders, holding a pot of ale in one hand and a huge club in the other.

Hogarth was an angry man when he worked on that portrait, for his unscrupulous and unprovoked attack on Wilkes, at the moment when Wilkes stood for all that was free and honest in English politics, had drawn from Churchill a satire of sustained and crushing ferocity:

> Virtue, with due contempt, saw Hogarth stand,
> The murderous pencil in his palsied hand.
> What was the cause of Liberty to him,
> Or what was Honour? let them sink or swim,
> So he may gratify, without control,
> The mean resentments of his selfish soul.
> Let freedom perish; if to freedom true
> In that same ruin Wilkes may perish too.

But even in the heat and fury of one of the most savage literary gang-wars of a savage age Hogarth remained an artist of genius and his portrait contains not a little of the essential truth both as to the outer man and to his quality and equipment as a writer. This

truth Churchill himself was ready to admit. In 'Independence' one of the last and strongest of his poems, he must have had Hogarth's caricature in mind when he wrote of himself as:

> A bear, whom, from the moment he was born
> His dam despised, and left unlicked in scorn ...
> Vast were his bones, his muscles twisted strong:
> His face was short but broader than 'twas long;
> His features, though by nature they were large,
> Contentment had contrived to overcharge,
> And bury meaning, save that we might spy
> Sense lowering in the penthouse of his eye.

This is a true picture of a man, who, whatever his faults, rarely deceived himself, and his work bears the same character: breadth, contentment, strong sense go far to make good the absence of subtlety or the higher sort of imagination. Perhaps it may seem a paradox that the work of a satirical poet should be marked by contentment, but Churchill's satire always springs from a genuine, impersonal indignation against folly and corruption or from a joyful and exuberant acceptance of battle for its own sake and is never the mere projection of his own personal unhappiness. His weapon *was* the club, but he learnt to use it with the same sort of dexterity that others could achieve only with the rapier, perhaps because he was so strong that in his hands the club felt light.

And he lived in a time when the club was in fact the appropriate weapon for a poet who was also a radical. It was an age of extreme corruption employed by second-rate men for second-rate ends. A time when, in his own words, 'the damned aristocracy is gaining ground in this country' at the very moment when it was losing all claims to be called an aristocracy, when it was becoming bloated, money-bound and utterly vulgar, the moment when the *beerage* was visibly and unmistakably coming to birth.

The arrival of the *beerage* (a phenomenon closely connected with the growth of colonial exploitation) produced special problems for the writer. Patronage was ending, the 'great reading public' had not yet appeared. What patronage still remained was such as no self-respecting poet could endure. In 'Independence', the poem in which he most truly flayed the 'damned aristocracy', Churchill shows a keen awareness of what was happening, as well as an understanding of the disadvantages that had always attended patronage even at its best:

> Patrons in days of yore were men of sense,
> Were men of taste, and had a fair pretence
> To rule in letters – some were even heard
> To read off-hand and never spell a word ...
> Our Patrons are of quite a different strain,
> With neither sense nor taste: against the grain
> They patronise for fashion's sake – no more –
> And keep a bard just as they keep a whore.

In the age of Bute and Sandwich the poet without private means had but one alternative. Either to become utterly servile and null, or to stand completely on his own feet and hold his ground against all comers. The situation that had existed in the time of Dryden and Swift, when to a certain limited extent, the poet could accept patronage and still preserve his personal and poetic integrity, was past. Almost alone in his generation Churchill chose the way of struggle and independence.

It was not an easy world to be born into for one, as he was, outside the circle of privilege. His father was a poor parson: he himself was thrust early into a church in which the unprivileged could only make a way by life-long and unremitting belly-crawling. For Churchill his profession meant either this or to 'pray and starve on forty pounds a year'. We need not doubt that his enemies were speaking from observed fact when they declared that he was often compelled

> to duck into a cellar in St Giles' where the knives and forks were chained to the table for fear the company should steal them, and there dine sumptuously upon ox-cheek.

He liked neither the duties of a parson nor the conditions under which those duties had to be performed, and in 1761 he quite deliberately abandoned them to commence poetry with a satire upon actors which was instantly successful beyond all possible expectation.

A year later he met John Wilkes, just beginning his agitation for the freedom of the press, free elections and democratic liberty that heralded the profounder agitations which accompanied the French Revolution. The two men joined forces and much of the best and strongest writing in the *North Briton* was Churchill's. It was a happy partnership and in it Churchill found his real vocation and his opportunity. In the few years that remained before his death in

1764 at the age of 33, his output was remarkable both in quality and quantity. Certainly it was limited in range, but he characteristically preferred to stick to what he found was his true medium rather than to experiment. In this preference are shown both his limitations and the self-knowledge that was one of the main sources of his strength. Poem after poem appeared in the next two years: 'The Prophecy of Famine', attacking Scotland because the arch-enemy, Bute, was a Scot, 'Gotham', attacking the abuse of royal power, 'The Candidate', attacking the rat Sandwich:

> Observe his follies well, and you would swear
> Folly had been his first, his only care;
> Observe his vices, you'll that oath disown,
> And swear that he was born for vice alone.

Never, since Swift was driven out of date, had any poet possessed both the courage and the ability to 'maul a minister of state' in this style. And if Churchill was a lesser poet and a smaller man than Swift, if he lacked that fierce, concentrated venom or the despair for the human race that sprung from a passionate and frustrated love, he was Swift's equal in courage and in some other respects held advantages that made his satire more immediately effective. He was closer to normal human life, he spoke the language and thought the thoughts of common men easily and as a matter of course, and not by virtue of a supreme act of the imagination such as produced the *Drapier's Letters*. He wrote out of a composed and not a tormented self, not in isolation but as one of a company of fellow fighters, and what he wrote was therefore more objective and therefore closer to the mind of the time. If he had been told that for these very reasons Swift would have a thousand readers in a century's time to every one of his, he would doubtless have laughed and replied that that was no concern of his: he wrote to plague the damned aristocracy and to earn a living.

It would be absurd to pretend that he was, or ever wished to be thought, a great poet. He will never be the object of a cult, but he deserves to be read and to be remembered with honour as a poet of integrity and wit who enlisted in the army of freedom and never flinched from the struggle. In a corrupt age he was incorruptible, and it is this incorruptibility, as much as his rough dexterity which

lifts his verse well above mediocrity. He is worth reading today not so much for what he had to say as for what he was.

His ideas, as a matter of fact, were the least important thing about him. They were exactly those of other honest, decent and well informed men of the second half of the eighteenth century. He believed in democracy but not too much of it, in reason but also in revealed religion, in justice and fair dealing between men without understanding that injustice is the oppression of class by class. He shows very little consciousness of the existence of a class struggle at all, and, indeed, his democracy consisted largely in a total disregard for class distinctions that forced him to assert that a lord or a bishop was no way different from any commoner. He hated the pretentious hypocrites who dominated the established church, and in his lines on Bishop Warburton he fixed the type unforgettably:

> He was so proud that should he meet
> The Twelve Apostles in the street,
> He'd turn his nose up at them all
> And shove his Saviour to the wall ...
> A Christian without faith or works,
> As he would be a Turk 'mongst Turks;
> A great divine, as lords agree,
> Without the least divinity;
> To crown all, in declining age,
> Inflamed with church and party rage,
> Behold him, full and perfect quite,
> A false saint and true hypocrite.

It would be unfair, however, not to mention Churchill's condemnation of the barbarities inflicted upon the peoples of the East by Europeans in search of profits. In his time these barbarities were easily accepted by many radicals, including his friend Wilkes, or, if denounced, were denounced as they were by Burke, for purely party reasons. Churchill had no such hidden ends, and his lines in 'Gotham' have a fine and generous sincerity:

> Happy, thrice happy, *now* the savage race,
> Since Europe took their gold and gave them grace!
> Knowledge she gives, enough to make them know
> How abject is their state, how deep their woe;
> The worth of freedom strongly she explains,
> While she bows down and loads their necks with chains;
> Faith too, she plants, for her own ends imprest,

To make them bear the worst and hope the best;
And while she teaches, on vile interest's plan,
As laws of God the wild decrees of man,
Like Pharisees, of whom the Scriptures tell,
She makes them ten times more the sons of Hell.

It has doubtless all been said before and since. The point it that it is well said and cannot be said too often. The style, perhaps, is outmoded, the ideas have long ago lost their freshness, even the neat and telling language may be dismissed as machine-made eloquence. But what endures is the downright outspokenness, the refusal to be silenced, the determination at all costs to speak the truth as it appears to the poet. 'The true poet must be truthful' and across the years our true poets will recognise in Churchill a comrade.

Literary fashions change and the highly conscious nobility and fine sentiment of the eighteenth century is no longer altogether to our taste, but the fashion is not what matters and the critic has the right as well as the duty of looking beneath it for the naked man, the man who speaks to us direct as well as to his own generation. And in the case of Churchill there is not really so far to look, and for all the differences of our idiom we cannot but feel very close to the poet who declares to all 'half patriots' that:

When brave Occasion bids, for some great end,
When Honour calls the poet as a friend,
Then shall they find that e'en at danger's brink.
He dares to speak what they scarce dare to think.

1940, reprinted in *Language of Men*

The Last Puritan

William Hale White, better known as Mark Rutherford, was born the heir to a very honourable and peculiarly English tradition, the tradition of dissenting radicalism. His grandfather, 'a radical and almost a republican', had had his windows smashed for refusing to illuminate them in honour of victories over the French. A year after Rutherford himself was born, his father's house was attacked by a Tory mob in the stormy Reform Bill election of 1832.

Isaac Allen in *The Revolution in Tanner's Lane* is drawn from Rutherford's father, a bookseller in the little Tory town of Bedford, and one of the many half-forgotten heroes who never spared himself and who thought no risk too great in the fight for civil and religious liberty. His influence was, I think, decisive in moulding the temperament and genius of his more famous son.

But if Rutherford was born into a great tradition, it was one that was already in full decline, even though it could still inspire isolated individuals to lives of courage and usefulness. The heroic age of Calvinist Puritanism, the age of Cromwell and the Levellers, was indeed long gone. Calvinism was, after all, the faith of the bourgeoisie in its revolutionary period, and with the passing of that period, the partial success of the revolution and the opening of an era of complex and sordid compromises between the various sections of the exploiting classes, its character changed accordingly. In the eighteenth century English Nonconformity sank into a torpor which it shared with all other political and religious faiths. The French Revolution and the early struggles of the proletariat brought it to a brief revival that was yet the prelude to a final decline.

Even Methodism, in spite of the political orthodoxy of its founders, assumed a revolutionary aspect in the harsh life of the north country towns. Once more in England the enemies of the

people were Amalakites and Philistines, while the hungry, ragged Luddites and Blanketeers were inspired by memories of the sword of the Lord and of Gideon and by tales of the days when God had raised up a few poor men to save a nation.

Something of this feeling is communicated in the terrific sermon preached by Mr Bradshaw in *The Revolution in Tanner's Lane* on Jephthah's vow, in which the deliverance of Israel from Ammon is clearly an image of the political struggle. Probably Rutherford had himself heard that sermon or something like it from the Welsh preacher Caleb Morris, a man whose few recorded addresses still ring with a genuine passion even in the unsightly pamphlets in which they have been preserved.

Yet Nonconformity could never again free itself from the thick respectability that had overtaken it, nor was Calvinism, with its aristocratic doctrine of election, a suitable ideology for the new forms of struggle in which the exploited, unprivileged masses were more and more coming to the front. The gospel according to Calvin had less and less meaning for men living in the dawn of the proletarian revolution and of the age of applied science.

Year by year the issues of this class struggle became clearer and drove men to find new comradeships, new beliefs and new ways of expressing them. Mark Rutherford traces this process at work in Zachariah Coleman, the hero of *The Revolution in Tanner's Lane*:

> The reasons that drove him to alter his mind were, in the first place, the piety, methodistic most of it, which was then mixed up with politics; and secondly, a growing fierceness of temper, which made the cause of the people a religion. From 1816 downwards it may be questioned whether he would not have felt himself more akin with any of his democratic friends, who were really in earnest over the great struggle, than with a sleek half-Tory professor of the gospel, however orthodox he might have been.

As time went on, the Nonconformist churches lost their followers both to left and right. Their more prosperous adherents drifted into the respectability of the established church and the workers into the free thought of indifferentism which developed alongside political radicalism, till they were composed mainly of those who had no social pretensions or who were too poor in spirit to be class conscious.

At the same time, the Calvinist doctrines that had once inspired men to action were either whittled away or became barren dogmas

mechanically expounded and quite powerless to influence the lives of those professing them. No clearer indication of this change is possible than by a comparison between Rutherford and the other great Puritan writer, his fellow townsman John Bunyan. In Bunyan all is clear and precise. The way to the Celestial City runs indeed through slough and snare, but straight as a ruled line. The walls of Mansoul may be assaulted and even stormed, but they rise sheer out of the surrounding plain and there are no suburbs in which a man might live, doubtful whether or not he was a true citizen.

Rutherford's books are full of hesitation and half tints. Like Bunyan, for they both *were* Puritans, his concern is man's pilgrimage and the statement of religious truth in terms of human experience. But his pilgrims travel by devious ways towards a city that quite possibly does not exist at all, and the religious truth that once served has become so empty of meaning that only the most desperate struggle can bring it into touch with human life.

It is this theme of a great tradition in decline that is the real subject matter of all his best work. Growing up in the middle of the century, when the decline was far advanced, he was too honest and too wise not to be aware of it. He felt profoundly the absence of roots in the world into which he had been born.

> The facts of life for most of us are a dark street, crowds, hurry, commonplaceness, loneliness and worse than all, a terrible doubt, which can hardly be named, as to the meaning and purpose of life.

All his work is a search for a new life, a political and religious compromise that could replace the old certainty that had gone for ever. And because he could never quite bring himself to abandon the old, to accept the materialism and socialism which were the logical answer to his questionings, he never arrived at any answer that could bring him lasting peace.

He came in the end to think that the ways of God were inscrutable, to a stoicism which declared that salvation, in the sense of man finding himself at one with his surroundings, was for the few, to a curious humanistic interpretation of Calvin's doctrine of election that summed itself up in a conviction that the Lord will have mercy upon whom he will have mercy. But he never deceived himself into thinking that there was more than a provisional truth in any of his solutions.

Politically it was much the same. He believed in the people, but less in the people as they actually appeared to him, ignorant, easily misled, uncertain and brutalised by oppression, than in a people of the future, to whom a remnant, a little band of the elect, pointed the way. He felt that no sacrifice could be too great to bring this future even the smallest step nearer. And even for the people as they actually were he had a real affection and respect. With all their faults they seemed to him infinitely preferable to their culture, corrupt and selfish rulers.

I think it was just because he refused to be comforted, refused to accept any easy and specious solutions, never professed any final certainty that he could not really feel, that his work is so valuable to us. He ended an age. He proved beyond all reasonable doubt that some roads were closed. He made it unnecessary for anyone else to go through just the same kind of mental struggle and torment that he endured. He really was the last Puritan.

So far as any man may he has told us the whole truth about himself and his world and it is this honesty that makes him not only a significant figure but a great novelist. For when you know the whole truth about any one thing you can know the whole truth about anything. And not before. It may seem a very petty world, this of shopkeepers and small farmers and mechanics in sleepy country towns, but because it is perfectly focused and complete in every detail it opens the way to an understanding of the wider world that is only implied in it.

Its men and women are real people and are not only at home in it but could be transferred to any other world without losing their reality. Which is perhaps another way of saying that Rutherford had a remarkable sense of the uniqueness of the ordinary and the unlimitable importance of the common man:

> It might be thought that there was no romance in Cowfold. There could be no greater mistake. The history of every boy or girl of ordinary make is one of robbery, murder, imprisonment, death sentence, filing of chains, scaling of prison walls, recapture, scaffold, reprieve, poison and pistols; the difference between such a history and that in the authorised version being merely circumstantial.

Cowfold is the territory of most of Rutherford's best work, of *Catharine Furze*, for example, the most moving if not the greatest of his novels, and of the *Autobiography*, that fascinating blend of

the true and the might be true. The rich, quiet scenery of the Eastern Midlands, with its slow, willow-fringed rivers, the market towns where 'the fields came up to the gardens and orchards at the back of half the houses, and flowed like an inundation into the angles of the streets', the life that centred round shop, chapel and large meals taken at regular intervals, the flat lands where earth, sky and water seem to melt and merge and the flat lives where we can hardly distinguish the brutish from the sublime, are caught and set down with such faithfulness that once we have read about them we carry them in the mind's eye all our lives.

The style, too, has something of the same quality. There is an evenness, a fusing of the plain and the heroic, an apparent monotony that deceives us into thinking it is dull until we turn a corner and a flash of irony or a quietly perfect phrase reveals to us that we have climbed a hill, that, inconsiderable in itself, gives us a wide view over a country that is certainly not romantic but nevertheless infinitely desirable.

Much of all this Rutherford owed to his father, who had a fine prose style and 'used to say he owed it to Cobbett', and who was accustomed to tell his son, 'My boy, when you write anything you consider particularly fine, strike it out.' Like the country, the style becomes rich by refusing to spend itself upon extravagances, and in this both style and country are at the very heart of the English Puritan tradition.

The Revolution in Tanner's Lane goes for once beyond the world of *Cowfold* and proves that the limitations which Rutherford normally imposed upon himself were not the result of mental poverty and provincialism. The book falls into two parts. The first deals with London and Manchester in the years just before and just after Waterloo. It has as its subject the illegal radical clubs and as its climax the march of the Blanketeers.

There are quite a number of books which deal sympathetically with the sufferings of the people in this period, but this book deals with their struggle and their hopes. More than that, some of its most eloquent passages defend the right to Revolution. Zachariah Coleman says:

> I believe in insurrection. Everlasting debate – and it is not genuine debate, for nobody really ranges alongside his enemy's strongest points – demoralises us all ... When a company of poor men meet together and declare that things have got to such a pass that they must either kill

their enemies or die themselves, the world then thinks there must, after all, be *some* difference between right and wrong.

The second part of the book, connected with the first by the merest apology of a common plot, is about life in *Cowfold* twenty years later. At first sight there could hardly be a more complete contrast than that between the revolutionary turmoil of the first part and the rural calm of the second. And no doubt this contrast is part of the intention, but not the only or the main part. For, surprisingly enough, there is a common thread of the class struggle, even though Rutherford sees it rather as a struggle against stupidity and oppression, running through both. We are shown that the same forces which we have seen at work in Castlereagh's London and Nadin's Manchester are also at work in the 'peaceful' countryside and in a different historical period. The fact that he makes this new struggle centre round the Corn Laws rather than round Chartism is probably not important, since the whole character of Chartism was so distorted and obscured by bourgeois historians that it is only now beginning to be properly understood.

What is important is that we are forced by implication to conclude that the struggle is a part of the very nature of our society, is permanent and necessary and will continue as long as society retains its present character.

What the end will be we are not told. Rutherford did not see the end and never pretended to. Characteristically, the final sentence of the book is 'At present I do not know.' Only, very deep down we can perceive a faith that an end there must be, a belief in the essential rightness and necessity of democracy that in the long run must make the stupidities and weaknesses of democrats unimportant.

We must always beware of asking any writer questions he does not pretend to answer, of expecting wisdom beyond the wisdom possible to his class and age, of expecting him to look at his time with our eyes. Rutherford has and does none of these things, but no writer of his age and class saw further or more clearly. His advantage in being the *last* Puritan was that he stands nearest to us of all those who have seen by the light of that tradition: though he worked by a failing light, he was able to bring it closer to the object.

1941, reprinted in *Language of Men*

E.M. Forster and the Classless Society

> The first act of the state, in which it really acts as the representative of the whole of society, namely the assumption of control over the means of production on behalf of society, is also its last independent act as a state. The interference of the authority of the state with social relations will then become superfluous in one field after another, and finally will cease of itself. The authority of the government over persons will be replaced by the administration of things and the direction of the process of production. The state will not be 'abolished'; it will wither away. – *Engels*
>
> This new culture of a humanity that is united for the first time in history, and has abolished all state boundaries, will, unlike capitalist culture, be based upon clear and transparent human relationships.
> *Programme of the Communist International*

Perhaps the most striking feature of contemporary literature is its abundance of talented writers and its remarkable absence of great books. It would be easy to name twenty writers who have seemed at one point or another to be on the point of producing a masterpiece. After writing two or three good books they almost invariably begin to slip back just at the point where their work approaches the boundary between the good and the great.

The reason is, I believe, that there is today no mass audience to which these writers can appeal. There is a small audience, highly cultured and interested in technique, but too introverted and too conscious of its impending destruction to allow of either joyful writing or serene reading. It is for this audience, however, that literature is being created, and from it come the vast majority of serious writers. Outside this there are all the strata for whom reading matter is provided. This reading matter varies enormously in sophistication from the Savile Row of Aldous Huxley, through

the suburban chic of Ethel Mannin to the slop-shop of *Peg's Paper* and Sexton Blake. In each case, however, it is purely commodity production and is governed by the same laws as control the production of other types of manufactured articles.*

It is no doubt true that this gap has always existed, but it has certainly never been so wide. In the first place, the present abundance of cheap reading matter has only existed during the last few generations. More important than this is the general decline of bourgeois culture, which, following upon a period of unparalleled industrial expansion, has underlined the class nature of society and has also resulted in the great mass of the upper and middle classes drifting into the ranks of the consumers of manufactured reading matter.

Under these conditions few writers are likely to realise their potentialities. In any other age James Joyce and T.S. Eliot, to name two only of the most significant contemporary figures, would have been writers of the first rank. Born in the sixteenth century Eliot might well have been a finer poet than Donne: born in the seventeenth, Joyce might have been greater than Swift. Even today they are of tremendous importance, but their importance is as much sociological as literary.

Eliot writes for an audience which actually exists: an audience of people who are approximately at his level of sensibility but who are for the most part intellectually his inferiors. It is an audience that has failed to find a solution to its problems but which refuses to believe that no solution exists. Joyce, on the other hand, writes for an audience of super-intellectuals that does not exist and is never likely to exist. *Work in Progress* is the groping and muttering of a Samson in the prison-house at Gaza: no good can come to him even from the rout and slaughter of the Philistines.

Like Joyce, Forster writes for an audience that does not now exist, but, unlike him, for one that will come into being even though it may have to wait for a hundred years. Whether this appropriate audience will actually read Forster is another matter, and one with which we cannot be concerned. All this is equivalent to saying that Forster writes for the classless society that will grow up on the far side of the revolution, and it is therefore necessary to consider what are likely to be the characteristics of that society.

At the moment when Helen Schlegel in *Howard's End* learns of her sister's engagement to Mr. Wilcox, an event which was to be of

decisive importance to them both, she makes her confession of a faith which seems also to be Forster's: '... personal relations are the important thing for ever and ever, and not this outer world of telegrams and anger.' I believe that a realisation of the importance and possibility of personal relations will be the distinguishing mark of the classless society. After the revolution will come the age of Iron, when the consciousness of society will be directed towards solving the problem of poverty by the intelligent use of machines. But inevitably we shall reach a point where the improvement of industrial technique has little to offer a world that has a plentiful supply of necessaries and has ceased to desire wealth for personal ostentation. At the same time we shall be moving towards the point where a reconstruction of human values is possible.

Savages have little need for personal relationships because every action is closely conditioned by the custom of the tribe or group. They marry, make war, win food and amuse themselves along lines so rigidly laid down as to make the idea of such relationships almost incomprehensible. With the growth of civilisation such sanctions tend to disappear or to be modified into a moral code. In time this also comes to be questioned, and today we are discovering that the bases of many of our moral and religious beliefs are to be found in the tribal customs of savages. These beliefs are maintained largely by and for the economic structure of society but are gradually becoming weaker.

After the revolution they will disappear rapidly, and will be replaced by a new, temporary, 'war-time' morality, but largely by genuine personal relationships. As the Iron Age comes to an end with the 'withering away of the state' the war morality will be replaced entirely by these latter. The conquest of poverty will enable men for the first time seriously to tackle the more subtle and fundamental problems of gregariousness.

The statement that Forster is the novelist of this classless society is one whose importance and meaning may be easily misunderstood. Many writers have been able to shut their eyes on existing society and conjure up visions of a new and quite different order. Forster is not one of these. His importance lies in the fact that he is able to see the existing society as it is and to discover in it the seeds of the new society. In his novels he exhibits the essence of the new at work within the substance of the old.

There is a passage in *A Room with a View* which describes Lucy

playing Beethoven in the Pension Bertolini:

> Passion was there, but it could not be easily labelled; it slipped between love and hatred and jealousy, and all the furniture of the pictorial style. And she was tragical only in the sense that she was great, for she loved to play on the side of Victory. Victory of what and over what – that is more than the words of daily life can tell us. But that some Sonatas of Beethoven are written tragic no one can gainsay; yet they can triumph or despair as the player decides, and Lucy had decided that they should triumph.

And in *Howard's End*, his most completely conscious novel, Forster does define victory, again with reference to Beethoven:

> And the goblins – had they not really been there at all? They were only the phantoms of cowardice and unbelief? One healthy human impulse could dispel them? Men like the Wilcoxes or President Roosevelt would say yes. Beethoven knew better. They might return – and they did ... Beethoven chose to make all right in the end. He built the ramparts up. He blew with his mouth for the second time and the goblins were scattered. He brought back the gusts of splendour, the heroism, the youth, the magnificence of life and death, and, amid vast roarings of superhuman joy, he led his fifth symphony to its conclusion. But the goblins were there. They could return. He had said so bravely and that is why one can trust Beethoven when he says other things.

Like Beethoven, Forster is 'on the side of Victory'. He believes that we can and must achieve valid human relationships. This is something quite different from the optimism of the happy ending. Leonard Bast, the hero (if there is a hero) of *Howard's End*, passes through a life of sordid misery to an ambiguous death. He never achieves more than a glimpse of the kind of life of which he is capable. Helen and Margaret Schlegel, who are sensitive and honest and generous, injure him terribly by reason of these very qualities, and can do nothing to repair the damage they have done. In *The Longest Journey* Rickie dies having failed in everything he undertook, and having betrayed his deepest instincts for the sake of approximations. Death and failure and suffering are everywhere as common and as pitiful in his books as they are in the world around us – and yet, quite unmistakably, quite decisively, Forster is always on the side of the victory.

He knows that, with the world as it is, to attempt to ignore telegrams and anger and to establish human relationships must inevitably lead to suffering and disaster, but he knows also that we

must attempt this, that this way lies the future of man, and that in the very attempt is to be found the highest kind of satisfaction of which we are capable. The side of victory is the side of the classless society, and incidentally, here and now the side of the revolution. This is the reason for the serenity of Forster's writing. Because he has made the leap into the future he is able to contemplate the present without shrinking. He alone of contemporary writers seems to be master rather than the plaything of our age of transition.

Inevitably, Forster, writing for an audience that does not yet exist, receives little understanding from the audience dominant today. A reviewer, who very wisely prefers to remain anonymous, produced in *Life and Letters* a reaction that is typical and therefore worth examining:

> The general tone of these stories is that of one of his own refined spinsters; weary, distinguished, witty and irritable with the irritability of the extremely sensitive. He can convey, with the precision of hatred, the very tone in which a stupid remark is spoken. But a story like *The Machine Breaks Down* (sic) needs to be written with more conviction and gusto. Gusto is not one of Forster's qualities; and one does not want it to be; but he should not choose themes that require it. 'Do you see the mountain just behind Elizabeth's toque?' inquires the heroine of *The Eternal Moment*. Forster's mountains do not thrill, but when he concentrates upon Elizabeth's toque in the foreground, no one can beat him.

If I am in any way correct in my judgment of Forster, the writer of this review is not merely wrong, but has stated the exact opposite of what is really the case, and, as this *is* a typical review it is worth while to account for his curious misconceptions.

In a general sense, of course, Forster's work must seem unfamiliar to anyone who does not believe passionately in the classless society or has failed to consider its nature and implications, but this is no excuse for regarding him as a writer of refined trivialities. Actually, he alone today possess the capacity to deal with important themes and the courage to undertake them. His novels deal openly and triumphantly with such matters as truth and death and victory in a way that must seem positively indecent to Mr Huxley and all the little Huxleys who dominate the literary market. Perhaps they find the content of Forster's novels so

disconcerting that they are forced to shut their eyes to it and are thrown back upon his more superficial qualities.

Those who have never penetrated the shell of Forster's Cambridge manner will almost inevitably make some such criticism as the one I have just quoted. The essence of the Cambridge manner, a thing far less susceptible of analysis than its Oxford counterpart, seems to be a gentleness and hesitance of style that may conceal, and is often deliberately used to conceal, a passionate conviction whose holder is not sure that it will be reciprocated. In Forster this manner is present in an acute form, and leads him to understate, and to understate most where he is most in earnest. It leads him also to write often about people who seem inconclusive, and when he writes about decisive, elemental people like Stephen Wonham in *The Longest Journey*, or old Mr Emerson in *A Room with a View*, he betrays a certain wistfulness, and they tend to become rather the vehicle of a splendid poetry than living souls. They are more prophecies than people. The weaknesses in their construction are all the more obvious to these critics because the counterparts of Stephen and Mr Emerson who do exist are outside their experience, and so they are left with an overwhelming impression of a world inhabited by the Philip Vyses, the Mr Pembrokes and the Mrs Munts. To them a Forster character is usually Tibby Schlegel, rarely Margaret and never Helen.

They miss entirely, moreover, the undercurrent or theme that is important in all living novels but peculiarly so in the case of Forster's. Of all considerable novelists his plots are probably the most preposterous. People die and disappear in a quite irresponsible manner, and very rarely is any thread of narrative pursued uninterruptedly to its appropriate conclusion. This does not matter, because Forster is very little concerned with his plots:

> And a third man he says in a sort of drooping regretful voice, 'Yes – oh dear, yes – the novel tells a story.' I admire and respect the first speaker, I fear and detest the second. And the third is me. Yes – oh dear, yes – the novel tells a story. That is the fundamental aspect without which it could not exist. That is the highest common factor to all novels, and I wish that it was not so, that it could be something different – melody, or perception of the truth, not this low atavistic form.

The plot, then, is to Forster a necessary evil whose demands are

to be evaded whenever possible, and we have to look elsewhere for the core of significance in his novels. On this point there is another important passage in *Aspects of the Novel*:

> Is there any effect in novels comparable to the effect of the Fifth Symphony as a whole, where, when the orchestra stops, we hear something that has never actually been played? ... I cannot find an analogy. Yet there must be one: in music, fiction is likely to find its nearest parallel.

This may or may not be true in general: it is certainly true in its application for Forster's own novels, which seem not to be based on a plot but to be written around a theme, as is a piece of music. This is most easily seen in the short stories, which propose the basic ideas and symbols that are expressed in the novels by 'round' characters in action. Thus, the 'theme' of *The Machine Stops* is 'Man is the measure'; of *The Point of It*, 'I am I, and he who desires me is I'; of *Other Kingdom*, 'Everything itself and not practically something different.' For each story it is possible to find a theme: no doubt it is also possible to be mistaken in any given case, but that the theme is there and is fundamental there is no room to doubt at all.

This theme is something entirely different from a 'moral', and Forster's stories are not allegories except in the most elementary sense. The difference is easy to see if hard to explain, but seems to lie in the relation of theme to fable. The story in each case is a living growth, which springs up around the theme, and not something written to illustrate it, while the theme is an integral part of the story and not an afterthought of elucidation.

The novels seem to be written in the same way, but naturally the possibility of error in detecting the theme is much greater and grows progressively so as the novels themselves become more complex. This growing complexity leads to arrangements that can only be described as contrapuntal: often one suspects the existence of two or more themes, related but distinct. Thus, the theme of *A Room with a View* is clearly 'victory' and the counter-theme may well be 'Love is eternal.' The theme of *The Longest Journey* may be 'Sincerity and truth' and the counter-theme 'There is another coinage': and the themes of *Howard's End*, 'Only connect' and 'Death destroys a man, the idea of Death saves him.'

All this is speculation. What is certain is that Forster has

constructed his novels after the manner of a composer, and that those who will not listen for the undertones, and cannot catch the harmony of the completed work will be left with the impression of a tired, refined and talented writer neatly anatomising the shortcomings of trivial people.

It is no accident that when Forster, as in the passages I have quoted from *A Room with a View* and *Howard's End*, wishes to express his deepest convictions he should use musical symbols and analogies. In Beethoven above all he finds his closest affinity, and to him he refers again and again. It is to Beethoven rather than to any of his fellow writers that one must look for his literary ancestry, and this is only another way of saying that Forster is a great poet. He has chosen to use the novel, the most characteristic contemporary medium, as Shakespeare chose to use the drama for similar reasons. And just as Shakespeare escaped from the claims of his characters from time to time to indulge in outbursts of quite undramatic poetry, so Forster perpetually transcends the bounds of narrative in lyrical or rhapsodic passages that are no more out of keeping with their surroundings than are 'Timon hath made his everlasting mansion' or 'Of many thousand kisses the poor last'. It is as poet that Forster is most surely on the side of victory. It is as poet that he recognises most clearly the lineaments of the classless society.

1932, reprinted in *Language of Men*

* This was written nearly twelve years ago. Since then it is, I think, possible to see the emergence of a new kind of audience and of a new kind of writing. The reader should also be reminded that this essay was written before Aldous Huxley had taken himself to Pacifism and the Higher Seriousness.

Promise of Victory: A Note on the Negro Spiritual

What is the secret of the appeal which the negro religious songs have had for millions of people who cannot share the religious emotions they express, and have, perhaps, only the vaguest knowledge of the conditions under which they were created? It can only be, I think, that these songs say more than they appear to say, because they express some profound and fundamental human emotion common to a large part of the human race, and especially to that great majority which knows or feels itself to be exploited and oppressed.

Some of these songs have an obvious social or political meaning: '*Go Down Moses*' and '*Joshua Fit de Battle of Jericho*' need little interpretation, though it is interesting to note that according to William Patterson, a negro scholar and revolutionary, Moses was the code name of Harriet Tubman who first organised the 'underground railway' by which hundreds of slaves escaped into the free states of the north, and the singing of '*Go Down Moses*' was a recognised signal that all preparations were completed for an escape. It is easy to see, too, how the history of the Jews, another enslaved and tormented people, afforded countless parallels for the negro slave. Not only Moses and Joshua, leaders of revolt, but the Messianic promise of Isaiah and the lamentations of the Babylonian captivity, David's triumph over Goliath and the restoration of Judah under Ezra spoke directly of their own lot or held promises for the future. And, as we shall see, the passage over Jordan was not only the symbol of entry into a happier world after death. Jordan actually stood for the boundary line between the slave and the free states, and, less directly, for the ending of slavery altogether.

There is, indeed, a duality in religion which makes it under

certain conditions a ground for battle between the ideologies of contending classes. The slave owner was not opposed to religion for his slaves: the picture of a meek and suffering Jesus quietly enduring wrongs had an only too obvious value. So also had the injunctions of Paul, concerned to secure a foothold for his religion by reconciling the slaves of the Roman empire to their condition, insisting that all that Christian brotherhood demanded was the mutual recognition of rights and duties by all classes within the existing framework of slave society. Yet in practice it was never possible to limit the religion of the slave to the passive acceptance of these convenient doctrines.

After all, the suffering Jesus was also the triumphant Jesus, the hero who even in the midst of his sufferings and humiliations was greater and stronger than his oppressors. And the slave, identifying himself with the Man of Sorrows, could not be prevented from interpreting his triumph in a more practical, a more earthly, sense than was conducive to his continued obedience. We are reminded of the slogan of the serfs, revolting in Medieval England: 'We are men, formed in Christ's likeness, and we are kept like beasts.'

Nor could his attention be fixed solely upon the New Testament, and we know, from the history of our country in the seventeenth century, what a veritable revolutionists' handbook the Old Testament can become. Therefore it happened that, whatever his appointed teachers might say, the slave voiced in his religion, and above all in the religious songs in which the genius of his race found fullest expression, the whole character of his life and his unconquerable belief in his ultimate emancipation.

The people who sang:

> Were you there, were you there,
> When they crucified my Lord?

were thinking less of an atrocity committed outside Jerusalem two thousand years ago than of the lynching horrors they all knew and the bloody suppression of half a hundred slave revolts.

> When I get to Heaven, goin' to sing and shout,
> There ain't nobody goin' to put me out,

is the cry of the people outside society, segregated and humiliated by the colour bar and the Jim Crow system. It is in the same song

that the direct statement of triumph arising out of agony swells to the height of great poetry:

I know my robe will fit me well,
I tried it on at the Gates of Hell.

Here is the voice of a people which has suffered and endured to the utmost and which emerges with a sense that it has not been found wanting, which knows that it has come unbroken from the most terrible test that the malignity of man or devil could devise, and that therefore nothing it can be called upon to face need make it afraid. Here is the source of the dignity and assurance which we all feel to be the negro's outstanding quality.

Sometimes the sense of agony is overwhelming: there is a work song addressed to the sun which begins: 'Go down, Old Hannah, don't you rise no more,' which has always seemed to me to be one of the most terrible songs in the world. And in many songs the desire for peace and rest, even if it is the rest of death, is the dominant theme. This is natural enough for slaves driven to the limit under the plantation system, or for share-croppers equally trapped in the mechanism of capitalism. Yet it is just at this point that the strangest transformation takes place, and one which gives these songs their unique and final value.

For, in case after case, what is insisted upon is not the peace but the triumph of death. Death is not only the release of the victim, but the defeat of the oppressor. So that in 'I Stood by de Ribber of Jordan':

Now sister you'd better be ready
To see that ship come sailing over,
Now sister you'd better be ready
To see that ship come sailing by.
O sister, don't you mourn
To see that ship sail by.

Or in a typical emancipation song:

Oh, Oh, Freedom, Oh, Oh, Freedom,
Freedom, Lord for me.
An' before I be a slave
I'll be buried in my grave,
An' go home to my Lord an' be free,

it is hardly possible to say whether it is death or freedom or freedom in death which is the subject.

In a very real sense it is all three, and this is what gives these songs their extraordinary richness and depth. We feel that they exist on several planes at the same time, that the singer is aware of an opposition, which cannot perhaps be logically resolved but which is resolved emotionally. Death is a friend, death is welcome, death is freedom, death is triumph over the oppressor. And it is perhaps just when the exploited has reached this point, the point at which even life no longer matters very much, at which he will no longer fear what man can do unto him, that nothing remains to hold him back from the struggle for life. And so, by a final resolution, death *is* life. Certainly it is true that the tunes of these particular songs are quite exceptionally alive, and that in them words and tune are inseparable: without the tune the words are often poor and misleading. The tune always gives the words a more positive stamp than they would bear alone. The tune is always a part of the resolution.

It is, then, the *absolute* quality of these songs that gives them their mastery over the imagination. Verbal and rhythmic merits, though they are often considerable, are always subordinated and subsidiary to an intensity of feeling and purpose. They are the work of a people who have lived in the depths and emerged, the songs of the three holy children coming alive out of the furnace. In them misery and defeat and weariness and cruelty, and man's last and greatest enemy, the fear of death, have been fairly encountered and overthrown. They are a new *Pilgrim's Progress* composed in the more universal language of song. They are a proof of the indestructible goodness and power to survive and conquer which exists not only in the negro people but in all people everywhere. They give us a promise of victory in which we know we can have absolute trust.

1941, reprinted in *Language of Men*

IV Writings After 1945

Introduction to *The City of the Sun*

I

The period of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries was peculiarly prolific in utopian literature. It was a time when the relatively static condition of feudal society was ending in a prolonged and complex crisis leading to the development of a new order. Within the existing social structure new, bourgeois relations were growing, creating increasing tensions. No one at the time, of course, could see the new relations for what they were; what they saw and felt was a shifting of horizons, new possibilities accompanied by, and relating to, new difficulties and miseries.

The age of explorations was creating a new geography, a whole hemisphere opened for exploitation. And parallel with the new geography for a new astronomy, in which the finite universe of Ptolemy, earth-centred and surrounded by the unmoving Empyrean, was being replaced by an unbounded universe, any of whose countless stars might be new suns and new worlds. Campanella, who eagerly embraced the new astronomy, was not the only one to speculate on the possibility that many of these might be inhabited by men who might not have fallen into original sin, and so be in no need of redemption. In such a mental climate the bounds of the possible were enlarged in a way that was subversive both of church and state. Authority hit back, and from the middle of the sixteenth century attacks on the new ideas intensified, the Inquisition was strengthened and the Counter-

Reformation took shape. It was in 1600, more than half a century after the death of Copernicus, that Giordano Bruno was burned in Rome.

Alongside these developments and closely related to them there was an increasing misery and intensified class antagonisms. Feudalism in crisis intensified the exploitation of the peasants, bourgeois exploitation superimposed upon feudal laid increasing burdens on all producers. Colonial plundering produced an inflation which undermined the living standards of many, probably of the great majority, of the populations. It was an age of savage and savagely repressed peasant insurrections and of wars fought on an unprecedented scale with weapons of an unprecedented destructiveness.

It was, in short, an age of misery and of hope, in which men felt, as never before, both the need and the possibility of a more humane and rational kind of society. Utopias, essentially, were an expression of this feeling. The humanists, intellectual leaders of the new forces of the age, were confronted by contradictions which they found unanswerable. Not only that between striking intellectual and technical advance and increasing misery and disillusion, but between the need for change and the absence of any visible revolutionary forces capable of bringing it about.

They attempted a variety of answers, sometimes themselves contradictory. There was hope in the benevolent ruler, a philosopher king, there was hope in the enlightened elite, there was hope in reason, in mastering and obeying the laws of nature, the study of 'the whole book of God which is the world', in Campanella's phrase. Campanella had a full share in all these humanist hopes, and all find expression in his writings.

So, too, does his belief in progress. He, like many more, became convinced that it was possible to surpass the wisdom and achievements of the ancient world and that the time was at hand when that advance would take place. In his case this shared humanist conviction was perhaps reinforced by the older influence of his fellow-Calabrian Joachim of Fiore. He seems to have felt that he himself was destined to inaugurate Joachim's promised Third Age of the Spirit, in which all mankind would be united in a brotherhood cemented by a new universal religion based upon the immutable principles of natural law.

His utopian *City of the Sun* can be seen as a microcosm, or we

might now say, a model, of the promised world of the Third Age. Like other Italian utopias it describes a city, as opposed to the typical English utopia which is national in character: it is, in fact, an idealisation of the Italian city-state with its dependent territories rather than a nation-state, and its government is a purified form of the self-renewing oligarchies characteristic of Italy in Campanella's time. In Britain it has been perhaps the least known of the major humanist utopias: while in Europe there is an extensive Campanella literature in a number of languages, in English there is very little. A Latin version by Campanella himself was published in Frankfurt in 1623, but the first English translation, and that an incomplete one, did not appear until 1885.

II

Tommaso Campanella was born at Stilio in Calabria (the 'toe' of Italy) in 1568. His parents were poor and illiterate, but he entered the Dominican Order at the age of fourteen and became in time one of the most distinguished scholars of his age, studying at the University of Padua and elsewhere. Among those who influenced his early development were a Jewish astrologer named Abraham and Bernardino Telesio, author of *De Rerum Natura* (1565) whom Francis Bacon called 'the first of the new men'. He shared the common dislike of the undue influence of Aristotle, whom he called a pedant, and whose principles he believed to be founded on regard for authority rather than upon direct observation and experiment which he came to regard as the only true foundations of knowledge.

His rationalism and boldness of expression brought him into repeated conflict with authority. In 1591 he was charged with heresy but succeeded in clearing himself. In 1593 and in 1596–97 he was again in prison. Yet, in spite of all suspicions, he was no heretic. He looked forward to a universal religion uniting all mankind, embodying what was best in all existing religions. The only basis for this, he believed, was the Catholic church to which he belonged, purged of its abuses. Protestantism, which had not only divided the church but was divided within itself, seemed to him a dangerous obstacle to the achievement of his ideal, and he condemned it, often in extremely abusive language.

About 1598 his tour of education was ended and he returned

home to Calabria, then, like the rest of southern Italy, under Spanish rule. It was at all times a wild and ungovernable province, and perhaps especially so at this time. The idea of a universal society, organised on the principles of his City of the Sun was already forming in his mind, and he began to look for ways of realising it. His astrological studies had persuaded him that a favourable conjunction of the stars was approaching which would usher in the new age, and he believed that Calabria was the place where this must begin. Accordingly he joined, or perhaps organised, a conspiracy against the Spanish government. The conspiracy was betrayed and suppressed and in 1599 Campanella was arrested and handed over to the Inquisition under whom he suffered cruel and prolonged torture. The passage in *The City of the Sun* in which he speaks of a man who 'throughout 40 hours of torture ... remains silent about what he has resolved not to say' clearly refers to his own experiences. After a long time, realising perhaps that nothing could be extracted from him, his inquisitors ceased their tortures and he was held in prison in conditions where it was possible for him to study and write. In 1626 he was released on parole and in 1629 completely freed largely through the influence of Pope Urban VIII.

The City of the Sun was only one of a number of books written during his long imprisonment. Among others was *De Monarchia Hispanica* in which he advocated a world government under a regenerated Spanish monarchy. At first sight this seems inconsistent with his earlier activities, but a universal monarchy had always been his aim. Perhaps his failure had forced him to review the possible means of attaining it, and, while the City, on an immensely expanded scale, remained as an ideal, a universal Spanish monarchy may now have seemed a step in its direction. Yet a contradiction certainly remains.

He also wrote a bold defence of Copernican cosmology, which he saw, again, as a unifying force, based on reason and experience. In this book he praised Galileo, 'who after many centuries has by sensory experience rescued scripture from ridicule and distortion'. In one of a number of poems written in prison Campanella compared himself to Promethus, who has stolen from the sun the fire of knowledge in which man's ignorance may be burned away.

After release he lived in Rome under papal patronage – an indication of the many cross-currents within the church hierarchy

at this time – till 1634. Then another Calabrian conspiracy took place, led by one of his disciples, Tommaso Pignatelli. He may or may not have been involved, but Spain demanded his extradition. The French ambassador helped to smuggle him out of Rome and he escaped to Paris. One gets the impression that he may have become involved in a complex international political game which he himself hardly understood. In Paris he was received with honour, Richelieu granted him a pension of 3000 *livres* and he was able to continue his literary work. In 1637 he published a new and expanded Latin edition of *The City*. He died at the Dominican Convent of St Honoré in 1639.

In the last year of his life he wrote a poem in which France, not Spain, is accorded the honour of installing his universal monarchy. Under French leadership, he writes, a golden age will return, bringing universal peace. Labour will become pleasure when it is shared in fellowship amongst men, and all will acknowledge one Father and God. Nations will understand one another and fraternal love will reconcile all differences. This change of front can be sufficiently explained by his own experience of Spanish hostility and French friendliness or by his recognition of Spanish unworthiness to fill the role he had assigned to her. But it is also consistent with political realities. While at the beginning of the century Spain still appeared as the leading European power, by the 1630s her decline and the rise of France were becoming obvious.

III

Like More, like all the early utopians, Campanella was faced at the outset with a most intractable problem. All would be well in the state if the wisest could govern.

More wrote:

> Your Plato judgeth that weale publiques shall by this meanes atteyne perfecte felicitie, eyther if philosophers by kynges, or elles if kynges geve themselves to the studie of Philosophie, how farre I praye you, shall commen wealthes then be frome thys felicitie, if Philosophers wyll vouchesafe to enstruct kinges with their good counsell?

But how, in an imperfect world, were the wisest to be recognised, or, if recognised, entrusted with government? This

was an agonising question which dominated the first half of *Utopia*. More, in life, followed his own admonition:

> What part soever you have taken upon you, playe that as well as you can and make the best of it ... and that which you can not turne to good, so order that it be not verye badde.

Campanella entered the path of conspiracy and high politics. Both suffered defeat and bitter disillusionment. The problem, in their time, had no solution: the philosopher able to impose his will on politics and the philosopher-prince proved as rare as white blackbirds.

In their theoretical writings, like other utopians, they were able to evade the problem by presenting a commonwealth already mature and in full working order, something 'rather to wishe for, than to hope after'. The hope, such as it was, was that presented with such a picture of felicity men might be sufficiently attracted to wish to put it into practice. And indeed, in the long run, it may be that utopian speculations *have* had some practical effect by stimulating human desires even if the extent of these effects cannot ever be measured. So we discover our Utopia, our New Atlantis, our City of the Sun, in some remote corner of the earth and are invited to inspect and approve.

And Campanella, we may now feel, cheats a little because his study of astrology has convinced him that the stars themselves are working to ensure the ends he desires. Today this seems strange: astrology now is so obviously a bogus science that to found a society ruled by reason on its conclusions seems a self-evident contradiction. Yet in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries this was not so. In terms of the knowledge then available astrology seemed, and indeed was, reasonable. Keith Thomas, in the astrological chapters of his *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, shows that early astronomers were struck by the apparent contrast between the stability of the heavens and the flux and uncertainty of earthly affairs. By astrology they hoped to bring something of the heavenly order to bear upon earthly disorder. 'Astrology was probably the most ambitious attempt ever made to reduce the baffling diversity of human affairs to some sort of intelligible order.' It was, therefore, at this time a science which appeared to work on the side of progress and reason, and as such appealed most strongly to those radicals who were working to secure social

change. Thomas quotes a seventeenth-century writer as saying: 'The Familists are very confident that by knowledge of astrology and the strength of reason they shall be able to conquer the whole world.'

All this applies to Campanella in Italy no less than to English radicals. Astrology gave him grounds for confidence in the success of his undertakings and in his utopia provided a firm and objective groundwork for the political and social fabric. By its means the benevolent governors were able to apply their wisdom for the good of all the citizens. These governors formed a hierarchy at whose summit was a single supreme ruler, Sun or Metaphysician, the epitome of the philosopher-prince. He was expected to be, and in practice was, all knowing – master of every craft and discipline. Under him were three chief magistrates, Power, Wisdom and Love. In Campanella's system of thought these are the three great principles of Being, opposed to the three negative principles, Tyranny, Sophistry and Hypocrisy, which, in his City as opposed to the real world, have no place. Power is responsible for military affairs and the City's external relations. Wisdom deals with science, culture and education which are accorded a position of utmost importance. Love deals with reproduction, that is with sexual relations, but also with agriculture and the provision of all the necessities of life.

Campanella follows More, whom he had undoubtedly read, and the mainstream of classical utopians, in the abolition of private property: once men are given the chance to accumulate possessions, he believed, greed and selfishness will govern their actions. Meals and living are communal and all the things people need are given them from the common store. And, without private property, there is no reason for the continued existence of the private family. Children, as soon as they are weaned, are removed from their mothers and brought up in communal homes, where, 'they learn the alphabet, learn how to walk, run and wrestle, and study the instructive paintings', and later they begin to learn the mechanical arts. Their aptitudes are carefully studied so that their future occupations can be decided.

All this is fairly standard. Where Campanella goes beyond other utopians is in his ideas on sexual relations and eugenics. Later readers seem to have found these shocking: Halliday omits the passages concerned and Morley remarks that these 'can well be

spared'. What Campanella suggests is that where procreation is involved mating ceases to be a private matter but should be carefully controlled on eugenic and astrological principles so as to secure the finest possible offspring. Where procreation is not involved sexual intercourse is permitted under certain conditions, but it is not encouraged and is rather exceptional. As a rule the relations between men and women are affectionate and dignified but sexual attraction plays only a minor part in them.

Partly as a result of this scientific breeding, Campanella tells us, but also because of their attention to diet, their love of physical exercise and their skill in medicine, the inhabitants of his City are almost uniformly strong and beautiful. This emphasis on physical perfection may have been in Samuel Butler's mind when he wrote *Erewhon*. This seems all the more probable because of the remarkable exactness with which Campanella seems to anticipate the Erewhonians' unhappy attempt at compulsory vegetarianism:

> At first they did not want to kill animals, believing that to be cruel, but later, seeing that it was also cruel to kill plants, which have feelings, and that therefore they would then have to die, they finally decided that lowly things are made for noble ones, and they eat everything.

The City is laid out in seven concentric circles, each with its own wall, to correspond with the seven planets. On the inside of the walls are murals epitomising all necessary knowledge and these play an important part in the education of the young. The importance attached to education, the use of visual aids and the absence of routine memorising making a striking contrast with the methods of the time and seem to anticipate many of Robert Owen's innovations at New Lanark. Like Owen, too, is the way in which intellectual and physical activities are combined, with much stress on dancing, drill and games.

It is not clear at what age education ends, and since in its later stages it includes the mechanical arts it would appear to shade imperceptibly into productive labour. The obligation to work is universal apart from extreme age or total inability, and they find that for this reason a day of less than four hours is sufficient to produce all they need. The rest of the time 'is spent in learning through playing games, taking part in discussions, reading, teaching and walking, and always doing these things with enjoyment'. In this sense education continues throughout life.

Since they find it easy to produce all the goods they need, they have no use for slaves and slavery is unknown among them. In this respect Campanella goes beyond even More, and emphasises this point with one of his rather rare direct comparisons with things in his own time:

> It is not so with us, for in Naples there are some 300,000 souls, and of these not 50,000 work and those who do suffer great fatigue and wear themselves out, while the idle ruin themselves with sloth, avarice, lechery and usury, and harm many people by keeping them in servitude or poverty, or making them accomplices in their own vices, so that public services are lacking ...

Campanella's *City of the Sun* was thus both a criticism of existing society and the presentation of an ideal. Like most utopias it seems to us today a rather strange combination of admirable and alarming proposals. Admirable in its abolition of poverty, its utilising of science in the service of the whole people, in its concern for education in the very fullest sense and in its assertion of moral values. Yet we may also be chilled by the regimentation, by the lack of privacy and perhaps most by the purely utilitarian approach to sexual relations, balanced though it is by a very enlightened attitude to relations between the sexes where the birth of children is not in question. I think we must remember first the conditions existing when Campanella wrote, the extreme and almost universal poverty, the very small range of choice generally existing and the total absence of privacy even for the very rich. And second, we should remember that the most successful communities, many of which did afford an oasis of culture and peace in a tormented world, were the religious orders, where men and women came voluntarily to live under an often extremely rigid Rule because its advantages seemed to outweigh its drawbacks. This especially colours the utopias of Catholic Europe, and Campanella himself, as a Dominican, lived under such a Rule from which he never showed any inclination to depart.

The constitution of *The City of the Sun* might be seen as a development of such a Rule, extended over a whole working and self-renewing community on a large scale and to a situation in which men and women could live together. It was a Rule exercised for the good of all by a state at once omnipotent and benevolent.

1981

The Situation of Women in Shakespeare's Time

Perhaps the first thing that ought to be said about the position of women in the age of Shakespeare is that no general statement can be made which would apply to all women of that time. This would, no doubt, be true of any class-divided society, but it is true of sixteenth-century England in a rather special way.

The situation of women in the richer half of the nation – gentry, burgesses, tradesmen, richer peasants – was generally improving. They had more comfortable and better appointed houses, more educational opportunities, greater consideration and even more freedom. None of these things would be true of the poorer half – the womenfolk of the cottages and labourers. Eve continued both to spin and delve as she had done for centuries past, when she was not scouring pots with Joan in the house of a rich neighbour. And it is important to notice that she had to spin very much longer to enjoy anything like the same standard of living as her ancestors. J.E. Thorold Rogers tells us that in 1593 the winter wages of labourers were fixed at 4d a day, in summer 5d. Artisans were to receive 8d and 7d. The price of wheat, oatmeal and malt were such that 'the work of a whole year would not supply the labourer with the quantity which in 1495 the labourer earned in fifteen weeks' labour. The artisan could procure it with forty weeks' labour.'[1]

Even if we make allowance for the fact that 1593 was a year of scarcity, the inescapable fact is that the continued inflation of the sixteenth century had a devastating effect on the living standards of the poor and effected a drastic redistribution of wealth. The prosperity and increased comfort of Elizabethan England, of which the text books have so much to say, may have been partly due to improved techniques and increased productivity, but its major cause was a vast transfer of wealth from the poor to the rich

and the well-to-do. And it is, of course, these who have left both the written records and the buildings and artifacts from which our knowledge of the age is derived. About the poor we can say little more than that they worked increasingly hard for decreasing returns. Nor do they appear in the plays of Shakespeare. His rustics, though depicted with affection, are still well within the pastoral convention and do not reflect the bitter reality of actual conditions. Here and there, as in some famous passages in *King Lear*, he hints that he is not unaware of it. What I shall have to say will concern their more fortunate and more articulate sisters, but we must keep this silent majority constantly in our minds.

I want first to say something of marriage. We are to see a film of Romeo and Juliet: among the problems it raises is what kind of matrimonial arrangements Shakespeare is depicting, and, I think, condemning, and how far they were typical of his time. I suggest that what we see here is not bourgeois but feudal marriage, and that his attitude reflects a change that was then taking place, though we should not exaggerate its extent. Feudal marriage still persisted and, no doubt, many middle class families still followed the example set by their 'betters'. Parental discipline died hard. Aubrey tells us that in his youth 'father and mother slasht their daughters in the time of their besom discipline when they were perfect women'.[2] And no doubt girls like little Elizabeth Paston could still be 'beaten once in the week or twice, sometimes twice in one day, and her head broken in two or three places',[3] to force her into marriage with an unpleasant man old enough to be her father. And the arranged marriage long remained both common and respectable.

L.C. Knights in *Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson* suggests that marriage in the late sixteenth century was becoming increasingly mercenary, and supports this view with some contemporary statements.[4] I think that they prove the exact opposite – that a state of affairs which had previously been so taken for granted as to excite little comment was now beginning to be noticed and to arouse opposition. It is no doubt true that among the aristocracy and gentry the arranged marriage had become institutionalised in the growing use of the Court of Wards, in which the guardianship of heirs and heiresses became a commodity which was openly bought or given to privileged courtiers, the right to dictate the marriage of the ward being perhaps the most

profitable perquisite of the guardian. But this abuse was also increasingly resented and was to be abolished with the Revolution.

The point is that in feudal society marriage was a form of family alliance – it was estates rather than persons that were united and in any particular case the number of such possible alliances would usually be extremely limited. Among the bourgeoisie, though no doubt young people would be expected to marry within the range of their own class and income group, the more fluid character of commercial property would in practice allow a wider choice. Marriage might still have an economic basis, but the element of personal preference increased.

There can be little doubt where Shakespare stood in these matters. Annette Rubinstein in an unpublished manuscript for the Marxist seminar currently proceeding in Washington, 'Bourgeois Equality in Shakespeare', insists that

> in the plays we find over and over again an explicit assertion of the potential equality which can transcend the old caste lines dividing Jew and Gentile, Black and White, Commoner and Nobleman, or even Woman and Man.

Almost any of Shakespeare's plays give support to this claim, not least where men and women are concerned. Juliet shows no less independence and resolution than her lover. Desdemona not only defies her father and every social convention but takes the initiative in overcoming Othello's diffidence. Even the repellent Portia knows whom she wants and is prepared to go to any length to get him, as well as proving that she can hold her own in the man's world of law. And incidentally what a strange play this is, where the villain is heroic, the heroine unbearable and the cosmetic lyricism of the last act really does very little to conceal the moral squalor of Venetian high society. These are only three of the many plays in which independent, self-confident heroines (to say nothing of the minor characters) reflect the growing numbers of women in the upper and middle classes who enjoyed improved status, greater consideration and an authority as persons in their own right. In part this was facilitated by the advance in domestic architecture – in their houses with more comfort and more privacy than in the barn-like castles and manors or the cramped town houses of the middle ages, there was more scope for their activities. No Elizabethan woman, not even the Queen herself,

could yet claim a room of her own but she was beginning to have a domain. Few were idle: except among the highest nobility they tended to be fully involved in domestic duties. The diary of Lady Margaret Hoby shows her constantly occupied with such tasks at a time when most households of any size produced a high proportion of their food and clothing. The day of the shop was still distant and the housewife had of necessity to undertake a lot of planning and responsibility: failure on her part could produce disaster, perhaps six months later. Nevertheless Lady Margaret did keep a detailed diary in which domestic matters appear alongside her continuous anxiety about her spiritual welfare. Like other women of her kind she shared in the great advance in literacy which marked the second half of the century.

In this linked factors of printing and the Reformation were of great importance. In pre-Reformation Europe the study of the Bible by laymen was actively discouraged – even if they could afford the immense cost of a Bible, which few could. Now relatively cheap printed Bibles were generally available, as well as works of devotion and translations of the Greek and Latin classics and more modern literature. These were widely read by both sexes, but the Bible was undoubtedly by far the greatest single factor. Protestantism based itself on the reading and discussion of the word of God, not only in church but in family exercises and in private study. Literacy thus became not merely a desirable accomplishment but a necessity of salvation and it was felt that this means of grace should be open to all, though in practice this applied only to a tiny minority among the poor. But it did apply to women no less than men, especially in Puritan circles. Similarly, the concept of the priesthood of all believers could not be restricted entirely to men. If there is little evidence of the appearance of the women preachers who shocked the orthodox in the '40s of the next century, the pages of Foxe are studded with women saints and martyrs like Anne Askew and Elizabeth Young, who were not only prepared to die but were capable of standing up for their beliefs against the most formidable bishops and canon lawyers. Portia would have had little to teach such women. On another level were the learned and dominating Puritans like Lady Hoby, or Lady Bacon, who had no hesitation in laying down the line to her son Francis long after he had reached manhood. In fact the women seem to have been dominant in many households,

Catholic as well as Protestant: indeed there were a number of prominent Catholic families where the intransigence of the women prevented their men from conforming to the extent of becoming what was known as 'church catholics'.

Humanism demanded much more than bare literacy for girls of the upper class. Early in the century More's daughters were regarded as paragons of learning – though this did not save them from arranged marriages which, like many such marriages where family affection and good judgement prevailed, fortunately proved happy enough. Later in the century Thomas Becon, a follower of Latimer, advocating schools where children should be taught 'good letters' and study 'poets, orators, historiographers, philosophers'[5] as well as true religion, urged that girls as well as boys should be included, and not be allowed to confine their studies to dancing and needlwork. There was, indeed, a strong current in favour of higher education for girls, though few reached the level of the queen herself, who spoke several languages and continued regular studies of Greek with Roger Ascham for years after she came to the throne. Such heights seem to have been mainly confined to a restricted court circle.

This was, of course, the great age of the foundation of grammar schools, and by the end of the century few towns of any size were without one, while most large villages had at least a school where reading and writing were taught. How far did girls attend such schools? We do not really know, but it is probable that many of the village schools had pupils of both sexes. Joan Simon, in *Education and Society in Tudor England* produces some evidence that some grammar schools admitted girls.[6] It is impossible to say how common this was, but I suspect that such cases were not frequent. None, certainly, proceeded to the university. It is not entirely clear, therefore, how girls received their education. The nobility and higher gentry often had family tutors (who might serve also as chaplains) and the greatly increased number of students at the universities ensured a plentiful supply of these – such posts in the greatest households were much sought after and were often first steps to careers of eminence in the church or government service. In such cases the girls would frquently be taught with their brothers. The practice among the gentry of putting their children into great houses as pages or maids in waiting, though declining, was still quite common, and such children would be likely to share

in any education that was going. In other cases parish clergy might be employed, though few of these were very highly qualified till the growth of Puritanism late in the century raised the standards of clerical scholarship. In the middle classes, one suspects, girls were taught reading and writing within the family circle while their brothers went to the local grammar school.

In one other way, perhaps, Protestantism led to an advance in the status of women. Catholicism, with its cult of virginity, its belief that celibacy was the most desirable condition and marriage rather a concession to human frailty, tended to regard women as essentially inferior and as a source of temptation and sin. After the Reformation this was reversed. Celibacy was regarded as a beastly superstition and marriage as the normal and proper condition in which God could best be served. This, specially among Puritans, led to greater equality and increased mutual respect: in ceasing to be a sacrament marriage became a partnership.

Such a partnership existed in the Macbeth household, even if we may not entirely approve the ends to which it was directed. But perhaps I may be forgiven for ending with a famous theatrical anecdote concerning Lilian Baylis, founder of the Old Vic Theatre in which so many of our most distinguished actors began their careers. One of these was Sybil Thorndike, who was given the part of Lady Macbeth. Being young, and blessed with a naivety which happily she has never quite lost, she felt considerable difficulty in acting the part of such a monster of wickedness, and approached Miss Baylis with her problem. Miss Baylis looked at her sweetly, replying, 'Well dear, was she so terrible after all? She only wanted the best for her husband and family, as any woman would.'

Notes

1. J.E. Thorold Rogers, *Six Centuries of Work and Wages*, London 1886, p.391.
2. John Aubrey, *Brief Lives and Other Writings* (Anthony Powell ed.), London 1949, pp.11ff.
3. *The Paston Letters* (James Gairdender ed.), London 1897, Vol.1, p.90.
4. c.f. L.C. Knights, *Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson*, London 1962, pp.108ff.
5. Joan Simon, *Education and Society in Tudor England*, Cambridge 1966, p.188.

Shakespeare Jahrbuch, 1977

The First Battle of Naseby

Naseby battlefield hardly ranks among England's more famous beauty spots.

It is typically Midland, gently rolling, upland country – fields, a scatter of copses and probably rather more hedges (if they have not been very recently grubbed out) than there were when Cromwell and Rupert's cavalry saw them on 14 June 1645.

Yet there can be few places of greater interest to anyone with a sense of history or a feeling of the English past. A group of well-known historians, speaking for the Society for the Preservation of the Field of the Battle of Naseby, remarks that 'with the possible exception of Hastings, Naseby was the most important battle ever fought on English soil.'

I would probably differ from most of these eminent persons on almost everything, but with this I agree, and I share their horror at the suggestion of pushing a link road for lorries, connecting the M1 and the A1, across this site.

Quite apart from the general question of the sense or nonsense of the road construction programme which is cutting our island to ribbons and turning thousands of productive acres into barren tarmac strips, such a road in such a place would be an act of unforgivable vandalism.

For here, at Naseby, the future of Britain was at issue and a revolutionary leap was begun. If one can say that at any specific moment the old, feudal England came to an end, it was at this moment and at this place.

England had been at war for three years, years of confusion, of muddle and of missed chances. The attempt to fight a revolutionary war in a non-revolutionary way had led almost to defeat.

In the winter of 1644–45 a decisive turn was made with the formation of the New Model Army, a unified force to replace the half-private, lumbering and unstable armies which had so far conducted the war on both sides. It was led by men who wanted total victory and believed it possible.

Up to this day it had never fought a battle and no one knew how it would fight. Part of it consisted of Cromwell's veterans from East Anglia. But many of the other regiments were raw recruits, pressed men, strangers to war and to one another.

This is why Cromwell, later, spoke of his conviction on the eve of battle that 'God would, by the things that are not, bring to naught the things that are.'

'And God did it,' he added. We may be less assured than Cromwell in allotting the credit, but it is certain that at the hands of the New Model Army on that day feudal England received its death wound.

Out of their victory the New Model emerged, confident, disciplined, conscious of its historic mission.

It became not merely a superb military instrument but an active political force. Soon it was declaring itself,

> not a mere mercenary army, hired to serve any arbitrary power of a state, but called forth and conjured by the several declarations of Parliament to the defence of our own and the people's just rights and liberties.

The New Model is the historic proof that, in certain circumstances, an army, based on the people, can become a leading progressive force.

It was in this army of a new type that the ideas of democracy, civil and religious liberty and the quality of man first took definite shape. At Naseby they had seen that common men could do all that the gentry could do and could do it better.

No doubt these ideas would have emerged somewhere, sometime, but if the decision at Naseby had gone differently they would have emerged in other forms and perhaps more slowly.

So I believe that we should support anyone who claims that this historic site should be preserved as a national monument.

This does not, of course, mean that it should not continue to be used productively. It does not mean that it should not be wantonly savaged.

Let the planners build their road elsewhere. Or, better still, let them consider very urgently whether their road is really needed at all.

Morning Star, 4 August 1975

Pilgrim's Progress

Early in the seventeenth century Sir Walter Raleigh, disgraced and under sentence of death, wrote a poem about his desire for a life of pilgrimage in which he could escape from an increasingly unbearable reality and travel to the heavenly city:

> Over the silver mountaines,
> Where spring the Nectar fountaines [...]
> There the holy paths wee'le travell,
> Strewde with Rubies thicke as gravell.

Some eighty years later John Bunyan, tinker turned preacher, also wrote a poem of pilgrimage: He, 'who will constant be',

> Knows he at the end
> Shall life inherit.
> Then fancies fly away,
> He'll fear not what men say;
> He'll labour night and day
> To be a pilgrim.

An immense difference is to be expected in any case between disillusioned courtier and mechanick preacher, but this is compounded by the fact that one poem comes on the eve of revolution, the other near its conclusion. Raleigh's poem is full of disgust at all that had so far made up his life and ends with an almost surrealist prevision of his execution. Bunyan's exudes confidence and a prospect of further victories to come, but also the need for continued struggle, the sense of living in a still dangerous and hostile world.

For the paradox of the bourgeois revolution lies in the fact that its consequences are, and must be, different from its aims. No one, least of all the tradesmen, artisans and small farmers who formed

Bunyan's Bedford congregation, or the soldiers with whom he had served in his youth, had ever supposed themselves to be fighting for the kind of England which was to emerge from the Williamite settlement of 1688. Yet all the same much had been accomplished: for a season the world had been turned upside down and the heavens shaken, the 'people of no name' had asserted themselves and might do so again. The world which had emerged, if far from what they had hoped, offered them new possibilities.

For one thing – and this brings us direct to Bunyan – the mechanick preacher, however much he might be harried and despised, had survived the defeat of the Republic. In the heyday of the revolution he had emerged not only with a message of individual salvation to the poor and simple, but also of social and political liberation. At the end of the 1640s this social gospel had almost burst free from religious images and modes of expression into directly seculiar forms in the teaching of Winstanley and the Levellers. After the defeat of the left, the Thermidor of the English Revolution, in 1649, the process went into reverse and social protest returned to religious and millennial channels, at first with no diminution of fervour. The Ranters, with their savage denunciation of the rich, mark the highest point in religious radicalism, but some of the early Quakers were not far behind them. Coppe commands the rich: 'Give up your houses, horses, goods, gold, Lands, give up, account nothing your own. Have ALL THINGS common, or else the plague of God will rot and consume all you have.' And George Foster warns them that God, 'that mighty leveller', is coming 'to Levell and lay mountaines and hils low, even you that are greater and richer than your fellow-creatures'. Several years later the Quaker William Tomlinson writes: 'Woe, woe, woe to the oppressors of the Earth ... God will in time hear the groanings of the whole Creation, and then wo, wo, wo, to you who have been such oppressors and hard-hearted Task-Masters.' As the revolution passed into retreat these denunciations grew fainter but never entirely ceased.

Bunyan grew to maturity in this period of decline. He shared much but not all of the outlook of the Ranters and of the Quakers, with whom, in his later polemical writings, he coupled them in a bracket of disapproval. He tells us in *Grace Abounding* that as a young man he had 'met with some Ranters' books', by which he had evidently been attracted. For some time, he says, 'I was not

able to make a judgement of them'. Later he was antagonised by the wild behaviour of Ranters he met, and the Ranter and Quaker emphasis on the 'inner light' offended his scripture literalism. Mr Talkative, in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, is depicted as wishing to enlarge on 'the history and the mystery of things', a formulation common to Ranters and to radical antinomians like Saltmarsh. To us today 'inner light' ideas seem more attractively radical than Bunyan's reliance on the scriptures, and in a sense they are. But we need to remember that at this date the Bible, which placed the keys of knowledge in the hands of the poor and unlearned, was also a liberating instrument.

Bunyan's attitude to the rich, though consistently unfavourable, differed from that of the Ranters in that, while he expected them to be punished in Hell, Coppe or Foster looked to their destruction in *this* world. And, on the whole, his attitude mellowed with the passing of time. All this reflects in part, no doubt, Bunyan's different personality and a less radical social outlook of the Baptists as compared with some other sects. But it also reflects a new stage in the history of English dissent after 1660. No longer representing the outlook of a class in active revolt, they became more inward-turning and quietist. This is shown most completely in a passage in *The Pilgrim's Progress* where the Interpreter led the pilgrims 'into the slaughter house, where was a butcher killing of a sheep.... Then said the Interpreter, You must learn of this sheep to suffer, and to put up wrongs without murmurings and complaints.'

All the same, the rich are generally condemned, and Bunyan shows a delicate sense of class differences. The characteristic sins of the aristocracy are pride and debauchery, as is shown by their names – Lord Carnal Delight, Lord Lechery, Lord Hate-Good. Christian, like Bunyan, had little contact with the aristocracy except as a bench of magistrates. To By-ends, Money-love and Save-all he came much closer, and they have the bourgeois sins of greed, covetousness and dishonesty. Similarly, Mr Badman, while having the usual sins of the flesh, is seen primarily as a dishonest tradesman whose misdeeds include usury, fraudulent bankruptcy, asset-stripping and the use of false measures to deceive the poor. He is judged from the standpoint of independent producers in a traditional, pre-capitalist society. These were the people who had been the fighting core of the revolutionary forces, but were now on

the defensive, though not yet finally defeated. They also formed the bulk of Bunyan's congregation, and, when such people appear in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, they are give the classic petty-bourgeois virtues of thrift, sobriety and probity. Nothing shows Bunyan's attitude more clearly than the passage where Prudence explains that some springs 'rise out of the tops of high hills to show that the spirit of Grace shall spring up in some that are great and mighty, as well as in many that are poor and low'. Bunyan evidently felt it necessary to explain to his flock that it was *possible* for a rich man to be saved.

If it is possible to trace a general tendency towards moderation in Bunyan's writings as he grew older, this was by no means uniform. He also reflected quite accurately the political developments of the time. After twelve years' blanket repression of dissent, from 1660, conditions improved. The first part of *The Pilgrim's Progress* was written in 1675–6, when opponents of the regime, though not without good hopes, were still keeping their heads down. Then, in 1678 came the Popish Plot (and we should remember that if the Plot as presented by Titus Oates was bogus, there was a real and dangerous Catholic reaction headed by the Duke of York) and the counter-attack by Shaftesbury's New Country Party. The Old Cause seemed on the march once more, promising, if not an immediate return of the Republic, at least a considerable extension of civil and religious liberties. In 1681, when Charles II outwitted the Whigs at the Parliament of Oxford, the movement suffered a defeat, but hopes remained high and the struggle continued. All through 1682 there was continued excitement and hopes of a coup which would bring the opposition to power. It was in this year that *The Holy War* was written and in the fluctuating fortunes of the city of Mansoul we can find a reflection of the events of this time.

Of course this was not the whole content of *The Holy War*. Like any allegory it demands to be read on several planes at once. On one it chronicles the progress of the soul towards grace, as Bunyan had chronicled his own in *Grace Abounding*. This is linked with a millenarian theme: as William York Tindall says, 'Bunyan follows the progress of rebirth in the imagery of the millennium.' But the *form* given to the allegory reflects, I think, the immediate political background. We open with the city of Mansoul, originally united and happy, falling before the assault of Diabolus. There may be

here a hint at the seventeenth century Norman Yoke theories. Recaptured by Emmanuel after a conflict that seems full of reminiscences of the war of Bunyan's youth, it is weakened from within by the intrigues of Mr Carnal Understanding and his allies and falls once more to a renewed attack by Diabolus. We should remember that the Baptists, like other sects, had been increasingly disappointed by the 'backslidings' of the Cromwellian governments from the time of the dismissal of the Nominated Parliament. This time, however, the defeat was not total. The citadel of Mansoul holds out and the final reconquest of the city prepares the way for a glorious millennium. It has been suggested that this is a forecast of 1688 – but perhaps the England which might have emerged had Sedgemoor gone the other way would have been more to Bunyan's liking. In truth, *The Holy War* offers endless possibilities of interpretation: Kipling, in one of his least successful poems even adapted it to allegorise the events of the First World War!

The plausibility of some such interpretation of *The Holy War* as I have attempted is strengthened by many of its details. For example, Diabolus after his victory 'remodels' the civic constitution of Mansoul just as Charles had been remodelling the borough corporations after the Parliament of Oxford. Soon after, Bunyan was to take an active part in resisting the remodelling of Bedford. Again, prayer is represented in the allegory as 'petitioning'. In the years just before *The Holy War* was written the petition, first developed as a political weapon by the Levellers, had been revived on a mass scale by the New Country Party. The military events are described with many current technical terms, which Bunyan must have picked up in the course of his own service. A touching passage refers to the pleasure which the citizens of Mansoul took in having Emannuel's soldiers quartered in their houses – something which Bunyan no doubt felt worth noting as completely contrary to what must have been his own military experience. One senses that he may have felt that war was coming once more to England.

Another feature is the importance given to ministers and preaching in this book. This too may reflect contemporary reality – it was just at this time that the mechanick preacher was being transformed into the dissenting minister, something which was, indeed, happening to Bunyan himself. This change also appears in

The Pilgrim's Progress, Part II, so different in feeling from Part I. There Christian was a man alone, his pilgrimage a solitary confrontation of perils, with, at best, a single companion. Christiana's pilgrimage is a social, even a rather jolly affair with plenty of congenial company. This is mainly due to the continuous help and guidance of Mr Greatheart, whose role is clearly that of a minister in charge of a growing congregation. He foresees dangers, encourages the faint-hearted, is a father figure to the children. Not content with leading his flock he constantly goes out to seek and destroy evil wherever it may be lurking. It is tempting to see in Mr Greatheart's flair for dealing with the weak and with children something of Bunyan's own role and personality. The whole of Part II is in a sense an account of the formation of a gathered church. It reflects the growing stability of English dissent in its new role, no longer a revolutionary force but an accepted minority.

In all this I am aware that there are apparent contradictions, between the growing accommodation to limited aims and the continuing millennary prospects and enthusiasms. But this is because these contradictions actually exist, partly because of the development taking place, still neither acknowledged nor understood, partly within Bunyan's own social and theological thinking. Calvinism, with its determinist doctrine of election and predestination, its insistence that sinful man can do no good thing of himself, has never been a very satisfactory theory for revolutionaries, or indeed, for living in any sort of real world. If, before the beginning of time, you were irrevocably marked out either as elect or reprobate, the only possible purpose of pilgrimage was to convince yourself of your election. With his mind Bunyan accepted such doctrines and much of his polemical writing is an ingenious defence of them: when it came to living he found them irrelevant and *The Pilgrim's Progress* is a continual triumph of life over dogma. It was this which made it, for something like 250 years, the one book which almost anyone who could read at all was certain to have read.

Both in the creation of character and its fertility of invention it marks a great step forward in the history of the novel, which, with the development of bourgeois society, was coming to supersede the drama and the long narrative poem as the dominant literary form. Like *Gargantua, Don Quixote* and *Gulliver's Travels* it employs fantasy and allegory to build up situations of pilgrimage,

conflict and arrival. It drew upon a variety of sources, not only the confessional autobiography and sectarian pamphlets and treatises, but the emblem writers and the broadsides and chapbook romances which Bunyan admitted having enjoyed when young. Later he disapproved of such reading: Mr Badman is condemned for reading 'filthy romances' and Diabolus used them to corrupt the people of Mansoul. But motifs from them appear freely in *The Pilgrim's Progress* and do much to give it its particular flavour, as do the popular and proverbial expressions with which it is peppered. The total effect is that of a convincing expression of the real life of ordinary people raised to a higher power by the purpose and passion which informs it.

What that purpose was is not easy to put into words. Bunyan, if asked, might have replied that he was talking about the passage of the individual human soul through earthly life to the eternal life of heaven. But this is by no means the final impression that the book gives us, nor could this account for its hold on the popular imagination across the centuries. Nor, I suspect, was it what held together his Bedford congregation, and many more like it, 'come wind, come weather'. What Bunyan's congregation seem to have drawn from him, what we can draw from *The Pilgrim's Progress*, is practical help to live in this world with courage, honour and decency. This places it among the dangerous books, for nothing, in the long run, could be more subversive than to persuade the 'middle and lower sort of people' that it was possible for them to live in such a way. It was subversive in just the same sort of way as was Piers Plowman, the other great English allegory, written by another poor preacher two centuries earlier. We can be reasonably sure that Bunyan had never read, or even heard of, his great predecessor, but in the work of each there is the same basic theme – the quest of the common man for salvation, bursting through all barriers and overcoming all the handicaps imposed by poverty, ignorance and contempt. In claiming their heavenly birthright the tinker and the ploughman throw down their challenge to the established powers in church and state for consideration in this world as men 'formed in Christ's image'.

History Workshop, 1988

French Revolutionaries and English Democrats

It was not, of course, by chance that radicalism and the talk of parliamentary reform was first heard in England in the years just before the French Revolution. The same chain of world events that led to that climax was producing in England the equally fateful series of changes that go by the name of the Industrial Revolution. By about 1760 the long equilibrium of the eighteenth century had been upset. Prices began to rise, the vast robbery of the peasants' land by the Enclosure Acts was in full swing, factories where large-scale capitalist production was carried on began to appear in some areas, trade and banking, enriched by the plunder of East and West Indies, throve enormously. And as a result the power and wealth of the bourgeoisie grew apace and they began to demand a share in that political power that was still concentrated in the hands of a few great and privileged families.

The first stirrings of this change were rude and popular. 'Wilkes and Liberty' was the cry not only of the City merchants but of the proletariat of Hoxton and Shadwell. In 1768 there were great riots and strikes at least as much political as economic. Even when the agitation centred around Wilkes died away in the stupid splendour of the Gordon Riots of 1780 the democratic movement was not destroyed. It became, indeed, more respectable and appeared to have a greater chance of success. The Duke of Richmond, a leading Whig landowner and a member of the ruling clique, began his demand for manhood suffrage. In 1782 a few of the more flagrant of the corruptions in which the English parliamentary system was almost submerged were removed and Pitt himself put forward a motion for the setting up of a committee to make 'a report to the House [of Commons] of the best means of carrying into execution a moderate and substantial reform of the

representation of the people.'

Such a reform would naturally have been carried out in the interests of men whose substance was more conspicuous than their moderation, but in fact the committee was not set up and the man who was most influential in defeating the proposal was Edmund Burke. It is often said that the French Revolution caused Burke to forget his earlier and more liberal principles; this is hardly correct. Burke was consistent in hating and fearing the victory of democracy abroad because he had always hated and opposed democracy at home.

Eloquent as he was, Burke could hardly have prevented for long changes that were demanded by the whole movement of the social structure in England. In the years before 1789 all the signs pointed to a new compromise along the classic lines of 1688. The British ruling class, already plutocratic rather than aristocratic, would have admitted into its charmed circle those new elements whose wealth and position gave them an undeniable right to enter. And the way to any further extension of democracy would have become more difficult because it would have been in the interests only of the common people.

1789 ended the possibility of such a compromise, but this was not at once apparent to the reformers. At the outset, indeed, the revolution was greeted with enthusiasm by English progressive opinion. Dr Price, a preacher and writer with a European reputation, was speaking for quite a body of upper- and middle-class opinion when he declared in November before the Society for the Commemoration of the Revolution in Great Britain, a body founded in or soon after 1688 which had met annually ever since to celebrate the Whig Revolution with a dinner and a sermon:

> I have lived to see thirty millions of people indignant and resolute, spurning at slavery and demanding liberty with an irresistible voice, their king led in triumph and an arbitrary monarch surrendering himself to his subjects. And now methinks I see the ardour for liberty catching and spreading, a general amendment beginning in human affairs; the dominion of kings changed for the dominion of laws, and the dominion of priests giving way to the dominion of science.

The same enthusiasm found its way into the early ecstasies of Wordsworth and Coleridge, ecstasies soon diverted from practical politics into the Utopian dream of a Pantisocracy to be founded on

the banks of the Susquehanna, a dream which, as Coleridge wrote long after with naïve and unconscious honesty, 'as serviceable in securing myself and perhaps some others from paths of sedition ... travelling with the crowd of less imaginative malcontents through the dark lanes and foul by-ways of ordinary fanaticism'. Wordsworth and Coleridge were only two of many malcontents, imaginative or respectable, who found the lane of revolution too dark and too dangerous as the reality of bitter class struggle displaced the dream of easily and immediately attainable millennium. As the revolution in France became more and more popular, with the Commune of Paris and the peasant revolt driving forward the middle classes, the peculiar relation of class forces in Britain led inevitably to a change in opinion that lined up almost the whole propertied class against it.

To English observers the revolution appeared primarily as an attack on privilege, and in England privilege was as much bourgeois as aristocratic after the revolution of the seventeenth century. Any attack on privilege, resolutely pushed home, must therefore be dangerous, since the bourgeoisie already enjoyed most of the gains won in the first stage of the French Revolution and did not want to see any share of political power pass into the hands of the masses.

The dictum of Lord Justice Braxfield, that 'the British Constitution is the best that ever was since the beginning of the world and it is not possible to make it better,' became an article of faith accepted by Pitt and by all respectable people. While the bourgeoisie of most European countries welcomed the Revolution just because it was an attack on aristocratic privilege, the British bourgeoisie, with some honourable exceptions like Charles James Fox and his followers, hated and opposed it once its real character had made itself clear, and, after some initial hesitation, formed a solid counter-revolutionary bloc with the aristocracy. While the revolution divided all European countries on class lines, the line of division was drawn at a different point, and much lower down the social scale, in Britain than in all other countries.

Nevertheless, in spite of the stir caused by the publication of Burke's *Reflections on the French Revolution*, it was some time before the British government saw any reason for active intervention. For one thing, Britain was still recovering from the defeats inflicted by the American colonists. For another, hatred of

the principles of the Revolution was tempered by a belief that France would be permanently weakened as a political and commercial rival. So while Brunswick marched on Paris, Pitt sat quietly at home, content to treat the war as a purely Continental brawl in which Britain was not involved. It was not till the French armies burst into the Low Countries and the French government proclaimed a universal revolutionary war of liberation that he entered the First Coalition of 1793. With the history of the war that followed this article has no concern: it is our more modest task to trace some of the repercussions of the Revolution upon internal events in Britain.

Some historians have found a startling transformation of Pitt from peace minister into war minister after 1793; those who have followed closely his persecution of reformers at home in the preceding years will be less surprised. The advocate of 'moderate and substantial reform' revealed himself after the revolution as the Prime Minister who supported the excesses of Braxfield and declared that judges would be 'highly culpable' if they did not use their powers 'for the present punishment of such daring delinquents and the suppression of doctrines so dangerous to the country'. The doctrines in question being very little different from those which Pitt himself had professed a decade earlier. And when the leaders of the Corresponding Society were put on trial Pitt in person assisted in their examination and went far beyond the bounds of legality in the use of threats and lies to extort a confession.

The first result of the revolution was a rapid growth of radicalism among the lower middle classes and artisans. All over the country clubs sprang up for the discussion and propagation of democracy and reform. In some cities almost every inn had its club; at Norwich, for example, there were more than thirty such clubs at one time. They were small, obscure, short-lived associations of ignorant men, many of them, and there was little or no attempt to connect them one with another on a national scale. But they were given a force and a kind of unity by the example of France and by the inspiration which they all drew from the writings of a common man of uncommon genius.

Tom Paine, who has earned in his own right as firm a place in French and American as in British history, was the first great English democrat since John Lilburne. He believed that men were

by nature equal and that the test of all government was the happiness of the people. If a government failed by that test it was no right government and ought to be overthrown, if necessary by revolution. And by this standard kings and aristocracies were unnecessary to human well-being and had therefore no place in a rational society. Paine and his followers were not socialists because they believed in the right of property, though they wanted that right to be exercised in such a way that the rights of others were not thereby curtailed. Further, they were mostly themselves poor men and the right of property was not a part of their theories that was greatly insisted upon.

The democratic clubs, of which the London Corresponding Society is the outstanding example, might draw their inspiration from Paine but rarely adopted his teachings as a programme. In the statement of their objects we find usually some such formula as: 'An honest Parliament. An annual Parliament. A Parliament wherein each individual shall have his representative.' But such a modest demand, given the temper that existed among the ruling class, was in itself regarded as seditious. Some of the leaders, like Godwin and Holcraft, might be philosophical anarchists with strong pacifist tendencies, believing that education was the only thing necessary for securing democracy. They hoped, too, that it would be possible to persuade all classes of the reasonableness of their views. The working-class members, who constituted the overwhelming majority, had experienced the perfection of the British constitution from below and had fewer illusions. Even Hardy, who was the very embodiment of caution and always discouraged the loose talk of violence that was one of the characteristic vices of the clubs, was a firm upholder of the belief that all citizens should possess arms and be trained in their use. It was not long before the reformers discovered that the only possible way of attaining their ends was through open conflict with the state. At this time, however, their strength was much less than that of their opponents and the movement was crushed before it reached proportions which gave it any hope of success.

The strength of the clubs lay in the lower middle classes, the artisans and the craftsmen of London and the older towns where traditions of association had long existed and where the ground was already to some extent prepared by the agitation of John Wilkes. They failed to reach the new proletariat of the northern

factory towns, a class that was already terribly exploited but still raw and inexperienced, violent at times, but without the understanding that alone can make violence effective. The result was that when the reactionary terror was loosed the ruling class was able, in Birmingham, Manchester, Bolton and elsewhere, to turn popular indignation against the reformers whose houses were wrecked and their persons attacked with the open support of the authorities. After the Birmingham house and laboratories of the great scientist, Priestley, had been destroyed, George III wrote to Dundas, a notoriously corrupt borough-monger, 'I cannot but feel better pleased that Priestley is the sufferer.' This was in 1791, and such organised mob violence soon silenced many of the middle-class reformers. The working-class clubs stood the test better and continued to grow.

In Scotland, whose people were on the whole more educated and who had national grievances of their own, the movement grew even more rapidly than in England. The Society of the Friends of the People held a National Convention in Edinburgh in December 1792, at which 160 delegates represented more than 80 affiliated societies. Next year their most outspoken leader, Thomas Muir, was arrested and sentenced to transportation for fourteen years, after a trial unfair even beyond what was customary where class issues were at stake. A second and angrier Convention was followed by the arrest and transportation of more leaders, Skirving, Gerrald and Margarot. More arrests and one execution succeeded at last in driving the movement in Scotland underground.

In Ireland the effects of the revolution were even greater, leading to the formation of the United Irishmen and the armed revolt of 1798, but these events had little direct connection with those in England and deserve separate treatment. It is enough to say that had a French army been able to effect a landing at Bantry Bay in December 1796, the whole course of European history might well have been transformed.

The defeat of the reformers in Scotland did not at first affect the situation in England very greatly. The most powerful of the reform clubs, the London Corresponding Society, held a membership of about 3,000 throughout 1792, 1793 and 1794 and at certain times was probably considerably stronger. Its members paid 1d. a week and were organised in sections who sent delegates to a central

committee. Firmly rooted among the skilled workers it was the first organisation in England that can reasonably be regarded as a working-class party. Its leaders were Horne Tooke, a rather raffish scholar who had been a friend of Wilkes, and Thomas Hardy, a quiet, solid, courageous and capable shoemaker.

Some indication of the extent of the movement's influence may be deduced from the fact that Paine's *Rights of Man* had sold 200,000 copies before it was banned in 1793 and even then continued to have a large illegal sale. A whole generation of thoughtful artisans treasured it and absorbed its teachings, even though its author had to escape to France to avoid arrest in 1792.

For a time Pitt took no further action, but in May 1794, when the fever of war made the position of anyone holding 'Jacobin' doctrines doubly difficult, the leaders of the Corresponding Society were arrested. They were placed in the Tower and a charge of treason was brought against them. It was a critical moment for British liberty. Up to this time treason had always been confined to open acts of rebellion; if it could be so extended as to include any peaceful attempt to make changes in the constitution the government would have a terrible weapon that could be used so as to make any kind of opposition impossible. There is good reason to believe that if a verdict of guilty had been secured against the twelve leaders the government had planned to begin hundreds of prosecutions all over the country. At this point a brilliantly reasoned letter, written by William Godwin (who was already famous for his *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*) appeared in the *Morning Chronicle* with decisive effect. By exposing the real objects of the prosecution it produced a widespread alarm and even before the trial forced the government on to the defensive. Although every effort was still made to secure convictions the London jury, trained by Wilkes to regard itself as the guardian of popular liberties, refused to be intimidated and returned a verdict of not guilty and the streets of London were beflagged and illuminated in honour of the victory.

Nevertheless the society was doomed. Laws rushed through a corrupt, scared and subservient Parliament destroyed the rights of free meeting and of the press. Habeas corpus was suspended and was to remain so for eight years. The Corresponding Society and all similar bodies were declared illegal and it became too dangerous for innkeepers to allow their premises to be used as

meeting places. As the war dragged on, bringing with it high prices and taxation and low wages, and as the growth of the factory system turned whole counties into places of torment, the anger of the masses increased. But it was deprived of all lawful means of expression. Even the very limited freedom to form trade unions that had before existed was taken away by the Combination Acts of 1799 and 1800.

Pitt could repress, he could arm and horse the middle-class yeomanry and send them riding and slashing over the shires, but he could not destroy class hatred or remove its causes. What he could destroy was the legal expression of the demand for constitutional change. That vanished and after 1794 the struggle took new and graver forms. Machine wrecking, blazing corn stacks, wild strikes, a state of virtual civil war in the industrial north became the order of the day. In this time the men who had formed the Church and King mobs that attacked reformers in 1791 became the Luddites of 1812. The new proletariat moved into action and learned to know its enemies. And if it took up the demand for parliamentary reform it made it a revolutionary demand, based on the belief that only by securing political power could it put itself on equal terms with its rulers and tormenters.

So that when, after Waterloo, the demand was again openly raised it was a different demand, backed by forces vastly more powerful than those of twenty years before. Nor was it only the working class that had changed. Pitt had been able to unite the whole propertied class behind his crusade against 'Jacobinism' but the alliance had been unequal. The landowners, with the financiers and the great London merchants who were always entering the ranks of and becoming assimilated to the landowners, kept the political power in their own hands and the new and increasingly wealthy class of industrialists had to take second place. Now the bogey was laid and the alliance dissolved; the Whig Party took up again the demand for reform that had for so long been allowed to drop out of sight.

But reform could only be won with the support of the masses, and to the masses the industrialists had, most unwillingly, to go, thereby releasing forces that they were quite unable to control. Cobbett and Hunt took up the work of Paine and a long, three-cornered war began. Widespread riots, the march of the Blanketeers, the Peterloo Massacre, the renewed suspension of

habeas corpus, temporary defeat, the battle for the repeal of the Combination Acts and the Reform Act of 1832, when the bourgeoisie, having allowed the masses to do all the fighting, quietly pocketed all the spoils of their victory, filled the history of the decades after Waterloo and continued the education of the workers that the French Revolution had begun. By bitter experience they learnt to hate and distrust equally Tory and Whig, landlord and factory boss. How well that lesson had been learnt the Chartists were to show.

It is most fitting that while the French people are celebrating the 150th anniversary of their glorious Revolution we in Britain are celebrating the centenary of Chartism. For the Chartists, as I have tried to show, are the sons of the Revolution. 1789 set in motion the train of events of which the conscious struggle of the working people for political power was the logical and inevitable outcome. The followers of Marat would have understood perfectly the followers of O'Connor and Henry Vincent and both would find themselves most at home among the Communists and anti-fascists of our own day.

Labour Monthly, 1939

Morris, Marx and Engels

It is no longer necessary to prove in detail that Morris was, in every meaningful sense, a Marxist. That battle, and it has been a long one, has been so completely won that only the invincibly ignorant will dispute the outcome. It is more useful, here and now, to examine his peculiar path to Marxism and the special quality which this approach gave to his understanding of it.

He never met Marx, who in any case was a dying man when Morris joined the Democratic Federation (DF), at the beginning of 1883. More than that, he says himself that at that time he had never so much as heard of Karl Marx, and, in *How Shall We Live Then?*:

> I became a Communist before I knew anything about the history of Socialism or its immediate aims. And I had to set to work to read books decidedly distasteful to me, and to do work which I thought myself quite unfit for.

We can pin-point the moment of his initiation pretty exactly. Before January he was totally unaware of Marx. But his biographer Mackail quotes from the diary of a friend, whom he does not name but who was most probably Cormel Price, under the date 22 February, which records that 'he [Morris] was bubbling over with Karl Marx, whom he had just begun to read in French'. Morris at that time knew no German and *Capital* had not yet been translated into English. How intensively he read 'this great work' (it is worth noting that he constantly used the adjective 'great' when speaking of Marx or his writings) can be judged from the fact that in October 1884 he sent it for rebinding to his friend T.J. Cobden-Sanderson who noted in his diary that when it came to him the book 'had been worn to loose sections by his own constant

study of it'. To read such a book to pieces in less than two years is no small feat!

Morris's plunge into Marxism was thus both sudden and immediate. It is not hard to imagine what took place. He joined the Democratic Federation largely through moral and aesthetic revulsion against capitalism. As he says, again in *How Shall We Live Then?*:

> Is it intellectual conviction deduced from the study of philosophy or from that of politics or economics in the abstract? I suppose there are many people who think that this has been the means of their conversion; but on reflection they will surely find that this was only its second stage.

And among the first things that would have been said to him would have been: 'Morris, you really must read Marx.' The man from whom this advice was most likely to have come was Hyndman himself. Morris's association with Hyndman was short, and Hyndman's dictatorial methods, opportunism and love of intrigue, as well as his very limited understanding of Marxism, have been justly criticised then and later. Yet it has to be said that he was a man of considerable talent, immense energy and the first to introduce the ideas of Marxism, in however incomplete a form, to the British public.

Another who might have given similar advice was E. Belfort Bax, who was already friendly with both Morris and Engels, but he seems to have joined the Federation somewhat later, when Morris was already deep into *Capital*. Later still the two were close colleagues, especially in preparing the series of articles which went to form their joint book *Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome*. Morris refers to Bax as among those from whom he learned, but the evidence of this book certainly suggests that by this time the relation was not that of teacher and pupil but of equal collaboration. It was some time before Morris was to meet Engels, whose hostility to Hyndman (fully reciprocated) would have made contact difficult. It was not till Morris came into open conflict with Hyndman in 1884 that his relationship with Engels developed. More will be said about this later. Finally, it is most improbable that Morris met Eleanor Marx till the beginning of 1884, when the Democratic Federation became the Social Democratic Federation with a new and more explicitly socialist programme and Eleanor

and Edward Aveling both became members. He very probably did read the two articles she published about her father in the May and June 1883 numbers of *Progress*. No better elementary introduction to the life and work of Marx was available in English at that time.

Morris was, as Shaw said, an unassuming man, conscious that he was entering a field in which he was quite inexperienced, and ready to take advice and instruction from those who seemed to know what they were doing – as Hyndman in particular certainly did. At any rate he hastened to take this advice, with results that we can see in his work. No doubt he found the details of the 'pure economics' of *Capital* hard to master, as he said. But these difficulties were of an entirely technical kind: the essential features of Marxism were absorbed totally and immediately. It might be said that he did not so much *become* a Marxist as discover that he had been one all his life without knowing it. This ready acceptance we must attribute mainly to one thing – his prolonged reading of Ruskin and the subsequent deep consideration of Ruskin's thought about the nature of art and its relation to man in society.

It is not easy in 1984 to understand the influence that Ruskin had, not only on Morris but upon two whole generations of socialists in Britain. I myself came to socialism largely by way of Ruskin, but my generation was perhaps the last in which such an approach was possible. Ruskin's shortcomings are indeed obvious and lamentable: his religiosity, his paternalism, his belief that society ought to be a hierarchy, his sentimentalism which substituted rhetoric and denunciation for serious analysis to such a degree that while we can often share his hates we can only smile at his suggested remedies. This was clear enough even a century ago, though much clearer now, but the point is that we all read him with enthusiasm but also critically and selectively. Morris could speak of his 'gammon' and his 'strange bursts of fantastic perversity', but also of 'my master'. And in *How Shall We Live Then?* he was able to make a balanced acknowledgement of his debt:

> I know that I had come to these conclusions a good deal through reading John Ruskin's works, and that I focussed so to say his views on the matter of my work and my rising sense of injustice, probably more than he intended, and that the result of all that was that I was quite ready for socialism when I came across it in a definite form, as a political party with distinct aims for a revolution in society.

There was always a quality in the power and passion of Ruskin's writing which made it possible for us to absorb what he had to give and then pass beyond it. And when we are tempted to be dismissive let us remember his unique and noble praise of the Paris Commune while it was actually taking place.

Morris at any rate was able to find in Ruskin just those things which prepared him for the reading of Marx and this approach helped him to find there many things which others failed to find. Marxism (at least in Britain) concentrated on the immediately practical – on the labour theory of value and the nature of capitalist exploitation. No doubt this was necessary and we must never forget how little of Marx's work was then available, but it led to a rather naive belief that one only needed to explain to the workers how they were being robbed for them to rise in revolt. Morris never neglected this aspect and expounded it repeatedly not only in his lectures but in a work of fiction like *The Dream of John Ball*:

> ... he shall sell himself, that is the labour that is in him, to the master that suffers him to work, and that master shall give to him out of the wares he maketh enough to keep him alive, and to beget children and nourish them till they be old enough to be sold like himself, and the residue shall the rich man keep for himself.

But his approach by way of Ruskin made it easy for Morris to see aspects of Marx which were ignored by his contemporaries, and above all Marx's humanism. Ruskin had been concerned almost to the point of obsession with such questions as the outcome of the division of labour, writing, for example:

> We have much studied and much perfected, of late, the great civilized invention of the division of labour; only we give it a false name. It is not, truly speaking, the labour that is divided; but the men: – divided into mere segments of men – broken into small fragments and crumbs of life.

Or again, the division between town and country or between mental and physical labour:

> The mass of society is made up of morbid thinkers and miserable workers. Now it is only by labour that thought can be made healthy, and only by thought that labour can be made happy, and the two cannot be separated with impunity.

Through his reading of Ruskin Morris was able to arrive independently at something very close to the concept of alienation – an aspect of Marxism ignored, and indeed unknown at this time. From Ruskin, too, Morris largely derived his deep moral and aesthetic revulsion from capitalist society – a revulsion which I think Marx shared but of which he seems at times slightly ashamed as unworthy of a true and rigorous scientist.

It may even be that the Ruskinian influences which played a part in shaping Morris's very idiosyncratic prose style have been among the reasons for the failure of many people – including a number of Marxists – to recognise the true nature of Morris's thinking. As Paul Meier says in *La Pensée Utopique de William Morris*, and here I must take my opportunity of acknowledging my indebtedness to that remarkable work:

> It is even not too much to say that concepts taken from Marx are often expressed in the language of Ruskin, which possibly is an extenuating circumstance in the blindness of certain critics. And we must not neglect the fact that certain of Marx's descriptions are to be found in embryonic state in Ruskin.

In *Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome*, however, Morris showed that he was perfectly capable of expressing Marxist concepts in orthodox language when he wished to do so.

If his attitude to Marx is one of admiration and even discipleship, that to Engels, whom he knew personally rather than through his writings, is more complex. It is to be regretted that these two great men, both standing head and shoulders above their contemporaries, each failed to appreciate the other's true worth. Though their references to one another are respectful they are guarded, and certainly nothing like intimacy ever developed. Such evidence as exists suggests that Engels regarded Morris, while sincere and personally irreproachable, as sentimental and unpractical, while Morris regarded Engels as bossy. Both were wrong I think. Morris was certainly not unpractical and Mackail even criticises him for a lack of sentiment! His practicality had been demonstrated by his ability to create and conduct a most successful business and by his easy mastery of a dozen crafts. But he was politically inexperienced, entering a world that was new to him and which confronted him with unexpected problems and situations. Engels, on the other hand, was rightly conscious of his

position as the living representative of Marxism and of his immense experience. He was used to being consulted by socialists from all over the world, and expected that his advice would be, if not always followed, at least seriously considered. With many calls on his time and energy he tended to be dismissive of the small and divided socialist movement in Britain. As he wrote to Laura Lafargue:

> Morris is a settled sentimental socialist; he would be easily managed if one saw him regularly a couple of times a week, but who has the time to do it, and if you drop him for a month he is sure to lose himself again. And is he worth all that trouble even if one had the time ... his ideal is a debating club uniting all shades.

So the two remained on civil but usually distant terms, to the loss of both. It may be remarked in passing that Morris's relations with Marx's two surviving daughters were more cordial. For this distance there were a variety of reasons. The first and simplest of these was the problem of time and space. They lived at opposite ends of London – Engels in Hampstead, Morris in Hammersmith. Both were extremely busy men with neither the time nor the inclination for socialising. Their weekdays were fully occupied: only on Sunday did each open his house to friends and comrades and for each this Sunday gathering was a fixed engagement. Each was the centre of his own circle and neither would ever have been prepared to abandon it to attend that of the other. So there was no time or place for them to meet except by a formal appointment which would not be made except for some weighty reason.

Another barrier, not only between Engels and Morris but between Engels and the British socialists in general, was his closeness to Edward Aveling. This, indeed, was an aspect of one of his finest qualities – his absolute loyalty to Marx and his family. The fact that Eleanor Marx had chosen Aveling was sufficient for Engels to give him unquestioned support. But the fact was that Aveling had, and on the whole deserved, such a bad reputation that, as Bernstein wrote, 'On account of Aveling many people kept away from Engel's house.' Morris was very tolerant of other people's personal weaknesses and for a time worked quite closely with Aveling in the Socialist League, but he certainly did describe him as 'a disreputable dog', which, taking into account the rarity

with which he expressed personal dislikes, must indicate a pretty strong aversion.

Yet I think that beyond all this there were marked differences of outlook and temperament which stood in the way of any real understanding or friendship. Morris was a romantic and a medievalist. His emotional roots were in the Gothic North. His visits to Iceland were among the main formative influences in his life and his socialist convictions were bound up with them. Engels, on the contrary, was a thoroughgoing rationalist, a man of the Renaissance and the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, both of which Morris, on balance, regarded as regrettable, though he was prepared under pressure to acknowledge their positive aspects, just as Engels, in *The Origin of the Family*, upon which Morris drew substantially in his late romances *The Roots of the Mountains* and *The House of the Wolfings*, was prepared to acknowledge the contribution of the barbarian North to social progress. Morris, Engels wrote, was 'quite delighted to find the Old Norse Edda on my table. He is an Icelandic enthusiast.' Perhaps one may be pardoned for wondering if it had been placed there for his benefit. He would not have been so delighted by Engels's earlier opinions on the subject:

> Scandinavianism is enthusiasm for the brutal, sordid, piratical Old Norse national traits, for that profound inner life which is unable to express its exuberant ideas and sentiments in words, but can express them only in deeds, namely in rudeness towards women, perpetual drunkenness and the wild frenzy of the Berserker alternating with tearful sentimentality ...
>
> Scandinavianism was the pattern of the Danes' appeals for Swedish and Norwegian support. But as always happens with the Christian-Teutonic nation, a dispute immediately arose as to who was the genuine Christian-Teuton, the true Scandinavian. The Swede contended that the Dane had become 'Germanised' and had degenerated, the Norwegian said the same of the Swede and the Dane, and the Icelander of all three. Obviously the more primitive a nation is, the more closely its customs and way of life resemble those of the Old Norse people, the more 'Scandinavian' it must be.

Fortunately this was hidden safely away in the files of the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* where Morris could not possibly have discovered it. And in fairness to Engels it should be added that it was written at the time of the first Schleswig-Holstein war and may not represent his settled opinion. Nevertheless it is poles removed

from that of Morris who wrote in *The Dream of John Ball*, 'in that land was the summer short and the winter long; but men lived both summer and winter; and if the trees grew ill and the corn throve not, yet did the plant called man thrive and do well. God send us such men even here.'

In any case, the period of active co-operation between Morris and Engels was quite short. There is no evidence that they met before 1884, and their first meeting may not have been before the autumn of that year. However, the situation was changing. Eleanor Marx and Aveling had joined the Social Democratic Federation and almost at once came into conflict with Engels's *bête noir*, Hyndman. In this conflict they found that Morris was on their side. In March, when Hyndman was defeated on two separate issues, Eleanor wrote to her sister Laura that 'Morris, who is a fine old chap, also spoke for us.' As the divisions within the SDF widened throughout 1884 Morris found himself, much against his will, cast as the leader of the anti-Hyndman faction. He wrote in August:

> I don't see how I can avoid taking my share in the internal conflict which seems likely to rend the DF into two or more. More than two or three of us distrust Hyndman thoroughly: I have done my best to trust him, but cannot any longer. Practically it comes to a contest between him and me ... I am driven to thrusting myself forward and making a party within a party.

Important issues of principle and strategy lay behind the split. Unfortunately when it came to the push these were obscured by petty and personal questions and the real reasons were never made clear to the members or the public. In December Morris and his supporters won a narrow majority on the SDF Council, and then, to everyone's surprise, resigned and proceeded to set up a new body, the Socialist League. Among them were Eleanor Marx, Aveling and Belfort Bax.

What is more to our immediate point, the split brought Morris into close and, apparently, fairly frequent, contacts with Engels. Engels welcomed the formation of the league, which he hoped might form the nucleus of a real workers' party in a way which he did not believe possible under Hyndman's dictatorial and opportunist leadership. A number of meetings took place in his house, one on the actual day of the secession at which he gave his

approval to the formation of the league. Engels contributed to its journal, *Commonweal*, for which Eleanor also wrote an invaluable international column. Unfortunately this period of co-operation was short.

The Socialist League from the first was composed of very diverse elements – to a large extent the result of the way the split had taken place. On the one hand were a number of anarchists who disliked Hyndman's autocratic methods but were also opposed to leadership of any kind. Others, with Eleanor and Aveling most prominent, were for Engels's line of a real party carrying on a political struggle on all fronts, including the electoral. Between the two stood Morris and a group who were certainly not anarchists but had reacted from Hyndman's opportunism to a belief that the one thing they could usefully do was to 'make socialists' by propaganda and education. As differences developed they were increasingly forced to rely on the support of the anarchists against the 'parliamentarians'. But for the first year the league seemed to be making fair progress and in January 1886 Engels could write to Sorge:

> Up to now the whole movement here only exists in appearance; but if a nucleus of men inside the Socialist League can be educated to understand the situation theoretically, it will constitute a great step towards a real mass movement which cannot be long delayed.

Thereafter he began to become increasingly impatient. In April he wrote to Laura Lafague that the league 'is sleeping', and in May that 'the league is in a complete muddle through having let the anarchists in.' Again, in November:

> Thanks to the stupidity of all its rivals and opponents, the Social Democratic Federation is beginning to become a power ... The fact is that ... the Socialist League is too deeply engaged in discussing its own rules and regulations with its anarchist members to have a moment to spare for events outside No. 18 Farringdon Road.

At the league's 1887 conference a resolution was passed holding to its anti-parliamentarian policy. Engels commented bitterly that 'the real reason was Morris's money which is to continue to pay the £4 weekly deficit on the *Commonweal*.' Matters dragged on unhappily till the 1888 conference at which a final break took place despite a plea by Morris for 'unity and good-will'. Direct contact

between Morris and Engels seems to have ended, though without hostility on either side. Engels sent Morris a copy of the American edition of *The Condition of the Working Class*, they shared the same platform at May Day demonstrations in 1891 and 1892 and Engels praised *Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome* when it appeared in 1894 and sent a copy to Sorge in America. Morris also maintained friendly relations with Eleanor Marx and the Lafargues and in 1889, when rival international congresses were held, Morris attended the 'Marxist' Congress while Hyndman attended the 'Possibilist' one.

Yet, brief as it was, Morris's association with Engels did play an important part in his political education, and it is to this that I want to turn now. His political writings from this time strike a deeper note, and seem more firmly grounded in Marxist theory. They suggest, too, some knowledge of writings by Marx still unpublished, or unpublished in English, which he could hardly have obtained in any other way. I have already referred to the influence of *The Origin of the Family* on Morris's later romances. More striking is the dialectical approach in which he was unique among British Marxists. In 1888 the famous *Theses on Feuerbach* were published in German. Morris knew little or no German and would have been most unlikely, unaided, to have hit upon a book published in Germany. Yet a year earlier in his lecture *The Society of the Future* he said:

> ... if individual men are the creatures of their surroundings, as indeed I think they are, it must be the business of man as a social animal, or of society, if you will, to make the surroundings which make the individual man what he is. Man must and does create the conditions under which he lives; let him be conscious of that, and create them wisely.

The closeness of the thinking, and even language, to that of the *Theses*, especially to the third, is remarkable:

> The materialist doctrine concerning the changing of circumstances and upbringing forgets that circumstances are changed by men and that it is essential to re-educate the educator himself.

I will conclude with the way in which Morris alone among British Marxists reflects the thinking of Marx in *The Critique of the Gotha Programme*, which, written in 1875, remained unpublished

till 1891. The manuscript was held by Engels and there is no other source from which Morris could have known of it. This is of peculiar importance since it concerns Morris's most positive contribution to the development of Marxism – his views about the future. It was his constant preoccupation with human needs and human happiness which made him speculate about the future in a new way, a way not utopian, in the sense of a preconceived scheme of things based on abstract principles, nor yet a baseless wish-fulfilment fantasy. Morris set himself to answer specific questions: What do men *need* to enjoy full, happy and dignified lives? What kind of society will enable them to satisfy these needs? What are the conditions which will enable them to practise what Morris called the 'art of living worthily'? *News from Nowhere* is the best known of the books which attempt to answer such questions, but by no means the only one. In such lectures as *How We Live and How We Might Live, The Society of the Future* or *How Shall We Live Then?* we can see how the fictions of *News from Nowhere* were based on considered convictions, and how mistaken those critics are who dismiss them as a pretty fantasy that need not be taken seriously.

His concern with needs made Morris look at the future with a curiosity Marx had never shown. All the same it was in relation to needs that Marx made a short but very suggestive excursion into the future – in the *Critique*. Here Marx distinguished between two stages in the development of socialist society. In the first stage 'equal quantities of labour in one form are exchanged for equal quantities of labour in another form'.

> What we have here [Marx wrote] is a communist society not as if it had *developed on a basis of its own*, but on the contrary as *it emerged from capitalist society*, which is thus in every respect tainted economically, socially and intellectually with the hereditary diseases of the old society from whose womb it is emerging. In this way the individual producer receives back again from society, with deductions, exactly what he gives ... The same amount of work which he has given to society in one form, is given back in another.

This first period, one of transition, can bring great and immediate gains to the mass of the people, yet its profounder historical significance is that it creates the conditions for its own supersession and the passing of society into a new stage:

> In a higher phase of communist society, after the enslaving subordination of individuals under the division of labour, and therewith also the antithesis between mental and physical labour, has vanished, after labour has become not merely a means to live but has become itself the primary condition of life, after the productive forces have also increased with the all-round development of the individual, and all the springs of co-operative wealth flow more abundantly – only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois rights be fully left behind and society inscribe on its banners: from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs.

There is perhaps no single passage in Marx's writings more pregnant: every word loaded with meaning opens new avenues of thought. Yet strangely enough, these ideas about the two stages were virtually ignored, and it took many years before they became part of the intellectual currency of the socialist movement – in England at any rate. The one exception was William Morris. He alone seized and elaborated these ideas and his later socialist writings might almost be seen as a prolonged commentary upon them.

It is certainly remarkable that the first time he makes use of these ideas is in a note to the manifesto of the Socialist League, drafted in 1885, probably with Engels's advice and in the year of their closest co-operation:

> The end which true socialism sets before us is the realisation of absolute equality of condition, helped by the variety of capacity, according to the motto, *from* each one according to his capacity, *to* each one according to his needs; but it may be necessary, and probably will be, to go through a transitional period, during which currency will still be used as a medium of exchange, though of course it will not bear with it the impress of surplus value.

These ideas were elaborated in other places: in *The Policy of Abstention* (1887) and perhaps most clearly in *True and False Society*, a year earlier:

> I will recapitulate, then, the two views taken among socialists as to the future of society. According to the first, the state – that is the nation organised for the unwasteful production and exchange of wealth – will be the sole possessor of the national plant and stock ... This view points to an attempt to give everybody the full worth of the productive work done by him ...
>
> According to the other view the centralised nation would give way to

> a federation of communities who would hold all wealth in common, and would use that wealth for satisfying the needs of each member, only exacting from each that he should do his best according to his capacity towards the production of the common wealth ...
>
> These two views of the future of society are sometimes opposed to each other as Socialism and Communism, but to my mind the latter is simply the necessary development of the former, which implies a transition period, during which people would be getting rid of the habits of mind bred by long ages of tyranny and commercial competition, and be learning that it is to the interest of each that all should thrive.

Morris, I think, was the first to use socialism and communism as names for the two stages: Marx did not use them in this way, though Lenin afterwards did. Later this usage became common enough.

I will make two brief points by way of conclusion. First, that *News from Nowhere* can best be understood if read as an extended commentary on the passage already quoted from the *Critique*. Every phrase there – the ending of the enslaving division of labour and the antithesis between mental and physical labour, the concept of labour as the condition of life, the relation between the development of the individual and the productive forces, the springs of co-operative wealth – all are expounded in this picture of a society based on the satisfaction of human needs. Second, by his unique grasp of the role of the two stages Morris was able to reach an understanding of revolution as a process rather than an event, and so project a model on an advance to socialism more realistic than that of any other British socialist of his time.

Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, 1985

A Vision Not a Dream

In 1889 a man went to sleep in Hammersmith and woke to find himself in an England that had been so long socialist that capitalism had become no more than a nightmare dimly remembered.

The man, of course, was William Morris and he has told us about his experience in *News from Nowhere*.

News from Nowhere, as Morris himself says, 'may be called a vision rather than a dream'. The distinction is vital.

The characteristic of vision, as opposed to dream or fantasy, is that it is firmly grounded in actual fact. In this case, Morris's vision grows from the existing class relations in Britain, the struggle for socialism and a clear understanding of the historic process by which capitalism was born and has created the conditions for its own destruction.

It grows, too, from the character of Morris himself. He was poet, artist and artisan, lover of the past and fighter for the future. Had any one of these elements in his make-up been absent, *News from Nowhere* would have been a different and a weaker book.

Morris in 1889 was 55 and had been a declared socialist for only six years. But his whole previous life had been a preparation for this step.

His study of history, his efforts to prevent the destruction of Britain's inherited treasures, his struggle to restore the standards of craftsmanship undermined by commercial mass-production, had steadily deepened both his understanding and his hatred of capitalism.

When in the 1870s he began to concern himself directly with political matters he quickly realised how little could be hoped for from the established bourgeois parties.

For Morris the peculiar evil of capitalism, as compared even

with earlier modes of exploitation, was that it turned the man into a hand. And he saw the victory of socialism as the reversal of this process, the taking by man of his full human heritage.

This is what *News from Nowhere* is about. Man has the power to transform his environment and in doing so, to transform himself.

> This is how we stand. England was once a country of clearings among the woods and wastes, with a few towns interspersed, which were fortresses for the feudal army, markets for the folk, gathering places for the craftsmen.
>
> It became a country of huge and foul workshops and fouler gambling dens, surrounded by an ill-kept, poverty-stricken farm, pillaged by the masters of the workshops. It is now a garden, where nothing is wasted and nothing is spoilt, with the necessary dwellings, sheds and workshops scattered up and down the country, all trim and neat and pretty.

Morris understood that 'human nature' is also a social product. There is little in common between the 'human nature' of 'paupers, slaves and slaveholders' and that of 'wealthy free-men'.

News from Nowhere has not always been properly understood. It is easy to allow ourselves to be distracted by the incidental detail, to feel, indeed, that everything is a little too 'trim and neat and pretty'.

In this way we may forget that what Morris is talking about is *quality*, is an attitude to living.

Under capitalism, with its 'horrible burden of unnecessary production', everyone, exploited no less than exploiters, has become entangled with a mania about possessions, the result of povery and the fear of poverty.

In Morris's new England all could find happiness not in possessing but in activity. The present contradiction between work and pleasure has gone, broken down by 'the freedom of every man to do what he can do best, joined by the knowledge of what productions of labour we really want'.

Morris's lesson is perhaps even more needed today than it was 80 years ago. In these years capitalism has not stood still. With each development we have new forms of corruption which he would certainly have found horrifying. The hideous inability of our society to make decent use of such an invention as the internal combustion engine springs instantly to mind as an example of the way every technical advance tends to be distorted.

The problem is not only to free our bodies from exploitation, but to free our minds from the attitudes and ideas which capitalism engenders and which, in our time, it constantly finds new and more subtle methods of spreading.

Even in a socialist society, emerging as it must do from the fear and poverty of the past, this is likely to be a long and painful business. It may be more difficult than we think to escape from the 'horrible burden'. To do so we shall have to make up our minds just what production is necessary and what is not.

News from Nowhere is likely to play an essential part in this struggle for a very long time and at many different stages in the process.

For over and over again we shall be faced in a new form with the question. 'How do we want to live?' 'Unless we answer it rightly we may find ourselves repeatedly diverted along false paths that can lead to frustration and disappointment.

'What,' Morris asked,

> is the object of revolution? Surely to make people happy. Revolution having brought its foredoomed change about, how can you prevent the counter-revolution from setting in except by making people happy?

No other book, in any language, fixes our eyes so firmly upon this goal.

Morning Star, 19 September 1968

T.A. Jackson

Tommy Jackson used to refer caustically to certain comrades who 'had the habit of trying to put in wedges thick end first'. To avoid this error in the most difficult task of trying to assess his immensely varied literary output in one short article, I will start with some of his minor writings.

First we should not forget his journalism – the mass of fine work buried in the *Communist*, the *Sunday Worker* and later journals. Some of the *Communist* material was reprinted in pamphlet form – a study of the British Empire and an account of the Russian Revolution in which R.W. Postgate collaborated.

Other pamphlets followed: the delightful, lighthearted *History of Clerkenwell Green* written for the opening of Marx House. This was the area in which he was born and grew up, and he knew and loved every corner of it. There was his study of Engels, and, a little gem, in 1935, *The Jubilee and How*. Much later came *Socialism: What? Why? How?*, based on his always popular lectures.

He was, indeed, as a Soviet reviewer once called him, 'a brilliant populariser'. This phrase, abbreviated by his family to Brilpop, became a sort of nickname.

These writings, if you like, were trifles. His first, and arguably his most substantial, major work was *Dialectics: The Logic of Marxism*. This was, as he said, 'an attempt to clear the ground for a better and fuller appreciation of that which gives Marxism its unity – namely the dialectical materialist method.

Today it is fashionable to decry the Marxism which served us in the 1920s and 1930s, and no doubt its limitations were considerable. But it is perhaps worth saying that whatever those limitations it was an immense advance on earlier levels of understanding which had been too concentrated on Marx's economics to see that Marxism was a unified world outlook which

must be taken as a whole.

Perhaps the major achievement of the 1930s was the rediscovery of the dialectic method as lying at the heart of Marxism. In this rediscovery no one in Britain (or perhaps anywhere else) played a more important part than Tommy Jackson.

Dialectics is a long, solid book, by no means always easy reading. But it is continuously enlivened by the wit, the polemic sparkle and the homely similes and illustrations which abound.

One specimen must suffice, as topical today as it was then. Speaking of the many intellectuals who 'discover' and annex Marxism without seeing its unity, he writes:

> Marxism becomes an Old Curiosity Shop in which political amateurs and literary dilettanti can rummage for decorative oddments, just as they rummage in the Caledonian Market for old china, pewter plates and bawdy prints.

Dialectics grew in the writing from its original form of a polemical article against a certain Fred Casey into a volume of 648 pages in which his erudition found full play. One can open it almost at random to find, in one chapter, for example, an illuminating comparison between fascism and Bonapartism or in another an exposition of the way in which Mendelyeff's Periodic Law illustrates dialectics.

If *Dialectics* came by accretion, the opposite is true of Jackson's other great work, *Ireland Her Own*. This was the fulfilment of a long cherished and often discussed plan and was originally written on a most lavish scale.

The difficulties of publishing in the period just after the war forced him to compress it to less than half its original length.

It was a heartbreaking task, entailing the destruction of much that would have been of the greatest value. Yet as it stands, in its wonderful combination of passion and clarity, this remains the one book which one can safely offer to anyone who wants to understand about Ireland.

Solo Trumpet, Tommy's autobiography, is another truncated work, a mere fragment of what was originally written. The unpublished parts are just as lively, and just as informative about the history of our movement as what has appeared.

Other historical writings include an introduction to a volume of essays on the French Revolution written by French Marxists, and

his *Trials of British Freedom*. This covers a number of cases – from Wilkes to the Communist leaders in 1925 – in which those in the dock stood, in one way or another, for some threatened liberty. In no other book, perhaps, is his enjoyment of a dramatic situation more apparent.

Enjoyment is the ruling feature, too, in his literary criticism. At a time when much Marxist criticism was rather solemn and pontifical, he wrote about books which he loved because he loved them. He felt that a book was only worth writing about if it was good of its kind, and he looked for what was positive. Judgment could come later, and his judgments, when they came, always commanded respect.

Best known of his writings in this field, and now almost legendary, is *Charles Dickens: the Progress of a Radical*. But equally remarkable are the full-length articles in *International Literature* on Scott and Shakespeare. I remember his surprised delight at being told by the editor that he could have all the space he wanted. English editors had never been so generous! He took full advantage of this dispensation, but in *Old Friends to Keep*, studies of English classical novelists, where he had to work to very strict limits, he showed, how much could be said in a few words by anyone who knows how to do it.

Morning Star, 25 October 1979

Edgell Rickword and the *Calendar of Modern Letters*

It was my great good fortune that the *Calendar of Modern Letters* appeared just when I needed it most and was most ready to profit by it. Fifty years later, I can still recall some of the excitement at discovering what seemed, and indeed was, a new kind of criticism, in which serious, if not always successful attempts were made to substitute objective standards for personal preferences. It was the work of a remarkable group of men – mostly little older than myself – but I think there can be little doubt that it was from Edgell Rickword that it took its tone and that it was his acute and wide-ranging individuality which stamped it.

The mid–1920s were in many ways a turning point, especially for the writing and criticism of poetry. Late nineteenth-century romanticism was dead, but the rather feeble naturalism of most poets of the early twentieth century just did not carry enough guns to offer an adequate alternative or to effect a theoretical demolition. Yet it was these poets and their following who still dominated the critical field, as is witnessed by the prestige then enjoyed by the 'squirearchy' of the *London Mercury*. If young men like myself were reading Eliot and recognised in him a new force, we were still bewildered and critically uncommitted.

The *Calendar*, then, came as a revelation, affording a whole apparatus of clues by which we could begin to find a path which hitherto we had only *believed* to exist. It was all the more effective because, unlike many critical organs before and since, it so often combined the application of real critical standards with wit and style, both in its reviewing and in the remarkable series of 'Scrutinies' in which it examined the work of still widely respected older writers. The balanced quality of its judgements carried conviction: the *Calendar* team always seemed ready to praise

where praise could be justified but were never afraid to condemn, especially where inflated reputations were involved. The praise went far to make the condemnation acceptable.

Much of the best criticism came from Edgell himself: one could instance his historic review of Eliot's *Collected Poems*, or the masterly demolition job on Noyes and Binyon in which consideration of work in itself inconsiderable is seized as an opportunity to state important critical principles. But perhaps most valuable was his battle for the restoration of an adult poetry instead of a poetry only 'fit for adolescents'. Poetry, he argued, must be liberated from the conventionally poetic if it is 'to become a natural form of expression in the modern world'. Only by including once again what he called 'the negative emotions' can it provide 'the means for a whole series of responses in parts of the mind which have been lying fallow for nearly two hundred years'.

The proof of theory is in practice, and in his own remarkable work (alas too small in quantity!) I think it is true to say that he did succeed in producing a poetry that is fully adult. Eliot brings together conflicting and discordant elements, but he seldom succeeds in integrating them so completely as Rickword often manages to do: in this respect perhaps, as in the richness of his language, he is unsurpassed by any poet of his time. Apart from that, his poetry has the characteristic *Calendar* virtues of combining style and wit with a judgement which always compels respect.

The *Calendar*, for many of my generation as for Rickword personally, marked an important stage in development, but it was only a stage. Its weakness, which always made what it stood for seem less clear than what it stood against, was the lack of a social reference: its criticism seemed at times to rest on abstraction, at others on rather unco-ordinated scraps of history and social theory. Its values, if attractive, did not always appear firmly grounded.

It was in the years after the demise of the *Calendar* that Rickword found his way to Marxism. I do not know by what steps this happened, but I think it may have been partly through the recognition of something of this sort. Later he was for some time editor of *Left Review* and of *Our Time*, on both of which he did excellent and distinguished work. But in each case he came to these when they were already established journals with a character

and policy of their own, and I do not think he was able to place his stamp on either as he did upon the *Calendar*. After that the Cold War deprived him of any opportunity of exercising his unique talent as editor of a critical review.

Poetry Nation Review, 1978

A.L. Lloyd: A Personal Memoir

The sad death of A.L. Lloyd (always Bert to his many friends) ended for me a friendship stretching back for more than fifty years. We met about 1932, when he was in his early and I in my late twenties, both hard up and struggling to find a foothold in the difficult London world. But if he found things difficult he never showed it: always he was cheerful, alert, composed, interested in all that went on, on the look-out for new experiences. In those days, too, he had not begun to put on weight – he was neat, trim and remarkably handsome. He was also remarkably tough – he had just spent a number of years in Australia, bumming around and working on sheep stations, and had clearly thrived under those hard conditions.

He had been sent there, he said, because he had failed to pass his School Certificate examinations. If this was an oblique reference to his family it was the only one I ever heard him make. And I found this reason for his exile a little hard to believe because even at that date he impressed me, as he has continued to do ever since, with the clarity of his mind and the quality and variety of his talents.

He brought back from Australia a quantity of paintings and drawings which gave a remarkable sense of the strangeness of that strange land and of the new cultural developments there in the early years of the century. I bought one from him for a pound or two – a serious sum of money for us both in those days – of two wild horses in a stony desert. I wonder what has happened to the rest of them? And his practical skill was matched by a considerable knowledge of art history, as he showed in his contribution for the booklet *Five On Revolutionary Art*.

Nor could he have failed in his language papers. He collected languages the way some people collect postage stamps. He seemed

to need only a few weeks anywhere to pick one up, and there appeared to be few European languages of which he had not at least a working knowledge. This gift proved valuable to him later in the collection and comparative study of folk songs. More immediately it landed him a job as manager of Foyle's Foreign Department, and this produced a remarkable story. This was at the time of Hitler's much publicised book burnings and Bert was instructed by the firm to send a telegram to Berlin saying: 'Please burn no books. We will pay highest cash prices.' Some have found this story hard to swallow; and certainly he loved a good story and could not always resist the temptation to improve it. But in this case I must say that he told it me in a manner to compel belief and that there is some independent confirmatory evidence. Foyle's, then as now, was a notorious sweat shop and he did not stay there very long, I think. Presently he was away as one of the crew of a whaler and this led to work on the journal *Picture Post* and for the BBC. Bert had all the qualities that it takes to make a first-rate journalist.

But of course it was as a folk-song scholar and a singer of folk songs with a fine traditional style that he became most widely known. Yet the character of his contribution has not always, I think, been fully understood. It was, as can be seen both in his writings and in his work on the radio, to rescue folk song from antiquarianism and sentimental nostalgia and to establish it as a living expression of popular experience. As he wrote:

> Whatever may be the case elsewhere, in England folk song is the musical and poetic expression of the fantasy of the lower classes – and by no means exclusively of the country workers. In the main the songs are evolved by labouring people to suit their ways and conditions of life, and they reflect the aspirations that arise from those ways and conditions.

It would be wrong to suggest that our deeper understanding today is his work alone, yet I think it is true that his contribution has been greater than that of any other single person.

I remember him telling me at an early meeting of his surprise and delight at finding authentic folk song not in a vanishing rural society but in a new, active culture like that of Australia. There it flourished most among such migratory workers as the shearers – who were also distinguished for political militancy. His Australian

experience taught him that 'the most innovative bearers of folk song are likely to be the most active-minded, best informed of the community', and this encouraged him, once back in England, to look around for similar manifestations. He began, too, to explore the songs of sailors and of American groups like the cowboys. The miners, of course, came quite a bit later.

From time to time he would drop into our house for a meal, bringing odd records he had discovered or some new-old song that he had picked up and would sing. He was developing his own distinctive singing style in these years, taut and unfussy. On the whole he preferred the traditional English style of unaccompanied song, but he was never pedantic about that or anything else and was prepared to accept an instrumental accompaniment if it seemed to add anything of value.

Shortly before the war I took him to the Eel's Foot at Eastbridge in Suffolk, a pub whose regulars had long maintained an excellent song school. Out of this visit came a historic broadcast – historic because it was, I think, the very first in which authentic traditional singers, as distinct from collectors and arrangers, were heard on the air. And from this stemmed the BBC's 'As I Roved Out' series and a new realisation of the extent of still existing riches. Before this time we had, regretfully, supposed that people like Cecil Sharp had scraped the barrel, and only just in time; that folk song only lingered in decaying pockets and remote rural corners. Now we found that all over Britain songs were still being handed on in the traditional way and that the tradition was still being enriched. In particular we found that such song was not confined to rural areas (and certainly not to 'the peasant', who in England had long ceased to exist!) but that there was a body of urban and industrial song no less worth exploring.

So began the present movement. With some of its aspects I cannot pretend to be in complete sympathy, but of the importance and value of Bert's contribution to it I have no doubt at all. His books – *The Singing Englishman, Come All Ye Bold Miners* and *Folk Song in England*, to say nothing of the delightful *Corn on the Cob* – are not only classics in their own right but have provided the frames within which others have been able to work.

I have a special affection for the earliest of these: *The Singing Englishman*, published during the war by the Workers' Music Association. It is a slight work and he came to regard it as

unsatisfactory. Certainly it lacks the fulness and perhaps the scientific precision of *Folk Song in England*. But it has a sparkle and spontaneity and a boldness of attack which make it a model for the application of Marxist ways of thinking to cultural questions. It looks squarely at folk song 'as music and poetry, the peak of the cultural achievement of the English lower classes'.

I think Bert's friends will always remember him as an outstanding Marxist humanist, abundant in ideas but always close to the earth, who loved and shared what he made the object of his study. An enemy of pretension and humbug and a delightful companion, whose wit was always employed not to wound but give pleasure and to provide more light.

Englisch–Amerikanische Studien, 1984

Communist Party History, 1927–41

The period covered by Noreen Branson's volume is perhaps the most interesting and significant in the history of our party.* It opens with its decline into the lowest point reached in membership and influence, and proceeds to record its recovery from that situation to one in which it was able to become a leading national political force, helping to shape events during a most critical time in British history. I should like to say at the outset that her book fully measures up to the scope and importance of the events with which it has to deal.

For me this book has the special interest of covering the time of my early years in the party. Joining at the very end of 1928 I found the battle over the new 'Class against Class' line just entering its critical phase. I remember scratching my head over long articles in the *Communist Review* with titles like 'The Right Danger', 'The Left Danger', 'The Radicalisation of the Masses' and 'The Temporary Stabilisation of Capitalism'. In these articles the struggle within the party leadership was being fought out in a coded language which, as a new member, I had to learn to decipher as I went along: much remained impenetrable to me, and was so, I suspect, to many members of considerably longer standing. Noreen's early chapters make many things clear which were previously unclear.

She describes the new line as a disaster and few people today will want to quarrel with that. She also makes it clear that it originated in the International and was part of a general change in Communist world strategy. But my own recollections support her view that the change was welcomed, and even demanded, by the

* The History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1927–41. By Noreen Branson. Lawrence and Wishart, 1985.

membership of the party. We all felt, I think, that it meant a more militant, positive, and one may say more political role for our party, which seemed to have fallen into something of a routine existence after the exciting days of the General Strike. We failed to see the dangers of seeking a short cut, that eternal feature of leftism. Our experiences over the previous years inclined us to take the most unfavourable view both of the Labour Party and the official trade union movement. Step by step the Communists had been pushed back to the periphery: what more natural than that we should seek to establish our own independent centre and focus? The ignominious failure of the TUC left in the General Strike had prepared us to accept the idea that left and right might be equally unreliable. And, finally, we felt that after the lesson of the General Strike the masses ought to be disillusioned and ready to turn to us for leadership. It was only one step to transform this *ought* into a dogma and we were all ready to grasp at any piece of evidence which seemed to point to the 'radicalisation' which we assumed to be inevitable.

If in these circumstances the party did not advance the fault must lie with ourselves – and especially with our leadership. This was the golden age of 'self-criticism', which most often in practice meant criticism of 16 King Street. Faced with internal dissatisfaction and pressure from abroad, there was considerable confusion within the party leadership and the debates which Noreen Branson summarises, making excellent use of the material collected earlier by James Klugmann, reveals some surprising cross currents and shifts of position. She does not attempt, wisely I think, to make any personal judgements on the part played by individual comrades – readers of her book will no doubt come to their own conclusions. One thing which stands out for me is the courage and good sense shown throughout by J.R. Campbell. It seems a miracle, and a very fortunate one, that he retained his position in the leadership at the 11th Congress when many so-called 'rightists' were removed. This was perhaps because of the high personal respect felt for him even by many comrades who were critical of his political line.

The position taken by Pollitt in all this is more complex and calls for some comment, if only because an incidental, and in the main positive, outcome of the struggle over the 'Class against Class' line was his emergence as the dominant figure in the party for the next

quarter of a century. This volume might almost have been given as its sub-title 'The Communist Party in the Age of Pollitt'. Undoubtedly he has a heavy responsibility as the initiator of the new policy: his thesis submitted to the Ninth Plenum of the CI, as elaborated by Dutt, was its theoretical foundation and he fought hard for its adoption both in London and in Moscow. Yet, if he was the initiator of the policy, he managed to avoid some of its worst extravagances and he was also among the first to set about its correction when this became clearly necessary. I have always felt, and I think this book supports the view, that one of the turning points in the history of our party was the controversy in the discussion leading up to the 12th Congress in 1932 between Pollitt and Gallacher on the one side and Dutt on the other over the role of trade unions. This was characteristic of Pollitt's style of leadership – he made mistakes, and sometimes serious ones, but he had a remarkable ability to recognise and correct them. If he can be blamed for his role in 1928 he deserves no less credit for his leadership under which the party overcame its mistakes in the 1930s.

Yet the correction of mistakes was in some ways remarkably slow – largely because it was impossible to admit that mistakes had been made. The accepted view was that expressed by Tom Bell in his *Short History*, published as late as 1935 – after the holding of the Seventh World Congress:

> If we read the resolutions of the Ninth Plenum, and draw comparisons from our experience after the Eleventh Congress up to the present time, we are better able to understand the tactical line being brought forward now after the Seventh World Congress. It shows that in substance not a new turn has been made but simply a more correct interpretation of the line.

We tended to say not that a change was made in policy but that a new situation had arisen. No doubt in a sense this is always true and the victory of Hitler did constitute a very great change, but this tendency made it harder for us to make a full analysis of our mistakes and so delayed their correction. It may be worth observing that Bell was one of the 'right' leaders removed in 1929 and that his *History*, cautious as it was, was strongly attacked in the *Labour Monthly* – for all the wrong reasons as we might now think.

One thing which stands out throughout all this period of our history is the way in which, though discussion was acrimonious and divisions sharp, decisions were regularly accepted and the unity of the party maintained – a contrast to much that we have seen in recent times. It was this unity, together with the generally very high level of activity and dedication, which enabled the consequences of mistakes to be minimised and the party to make such rapid progress in the 1930s. Even in the worst times there were successes, especially in the leadership of the unemployed struggle and the fight against the National Government. The foundation of the *Daily Worker* in 1930, which seemed to some comrades a reckless gamble, succeeded beyond all expectations. The central chapters of Noreen Branson's book deal admirably with this period of growth – the advance in industrial and trade union work, the fight against fascism and war, against imperialism and in defence of living standards. No less remarkable was the way in which Marxism, previously regarded as the viewpoint of an eccentric minority, won widespread acceptance, or at worst attention, in the intellectual world. Membership of the party had risen from under 3,000 in 1929 to about 18,000 at the outbreak of the war, and it was able to pass through the crisis of the reversal of its attitude to the war without loss of confidence or diminution of its campaigning ability.

Noreen Branson's method is a happy combination of the thematic and the chronological. Each chapter deals with a particular topic but they are so arranged that the record proceeds steadily forward. This makes for continuity and easy reading, but it is perhaps inevitable that some events and details should slip through the net or get less attention. Thus there is little coverage of the party's electoral record and even less of its work in local government. Something might have been said about the Workers' Charter movement of 1931, which was a serious, if ultimately unsuccessful attempt to break out of our position of isolation. And the departure of J.T. Murphy should perhaps have been mentioned: he was, after all, the one top-rank figure to leave during the whole of this period, something which could be said of few Communist Parties. These, however, are trifles and of small account compared with the more than adequate coverage of fourteen such eventful years in only 350 pages.

Our History Journal, 1985

The Glorious Revolution: Ireland

The Cromwellian conquest of Ireland was one of the matters left almost unchanged in 1660. The land which had passed to Protestants remained in their possession and they held over two-thirds of the country and considerably more of the best land. Under Charles there was some amelioration of the anti-Catholic penal laws, as had been the case in England except in the years of the Popish Plot crisis. Under James the situation changed considerably, and when Tyrconnel became Deputy was entirely reversed. Protestants were now persecuted and Catholics favoured. The corporations were remodelled, Protestant judges replaced by Catholics. The army became preponderantly Catholic. One of James's worst blunders was to bring the best regiments of the army to England where they only aroused hostility without being effective, instead of sending them to Ulster.

News of the revolution in England reached Ireland in December and Tyrconnel at once declared for James. There was a panic among the Protestants, many of whom escaped to England. Others concentrated in the northern towns of Derry and Enniskillen where they prepared to resist a siege. In March 1689 James arrived in Ireland with a number of French and English advisers and officers, a supply of arms and some French troops. In May he summoned a parliament in Dublin which consisted entirely of Catholics except for a handful of token Jacobite Protestants. Derry was besieged, but the siege was carried on most inefficiently. James and his Dublin government were far more concerned with their internal feudings.

Broadly, three parties developed with entirely different objectives. James and his French supporters regarded Ireland merely as a springboard from which to regain England, which they believed was only waiting to welcome their return. They fully

shared the English contempt for the native Irish and only wanted them as cannon fodder. The Irish Jacobites had no interest in James's return to England, preferring an independent Ireland. They had no particular affection for James, and if they must have him as king it was better that he should be king in Dublin where he would be under some control, rather than in London where he would be an English king from whom they could expect only neglect and exploitation. The French interest was different again. They did not believe that James's immediate return to England was at all probable nor did they desire it. But an Ireland under French control would be an immense asset in their war against the Williamite alliance and in the longer run would leave England permanently weakened. At the worst Ireland in revolt would help to divert English resources from Europe at a minimum cost.

At the end of May an expedition under Kirke arrived in Ulster but was not strong enough to raise the siege of Derry, which went on till the end of July when the town was relieved from the sea. Kirke perhaps deserves notice as a typical figure of this peculiar revolution. A professional soldier, he had distinguished himself by his brutalities after Sedgemoor: he now emerges as a zealous Williamite. He was unable to do more than maintain a foothold in Ulster. A large force was now prepared under Schomberg. William's most experienced general. His army was untrained, badly equipped and worse fed, and he could not venture to risk a battle with the Irish. Soon it was so wasted with disease that nothing more could be done that year. In the spring of 1690 reinforcements and supplies of good quality arrived, and in June William joined them. On 1 July William won a decisive victory at the River Boyne. James's army was completely routed and he himself ran away so fast that he hardly stopped running till he reached a ship to take him back to France.

All Ireland east of the Shannon was overrun, but Patrick Sarsfield's plan of defence in depth, brilliantly carried out, prevented a complete conquest, and William had to return to England leaving the war to be completed by others. With the flight of James it took on the new character of a war of liberation: Irish soldiers who had fought poorly on the Boyne began to show a different quality in a cause which seemed their own and under a leader in whom they had confidence. If Sarsfield's strategy had been followed resistance might have been prolonged, but the

French general who still had superior command insisted on a set battle, and the Irish army was destroyed at the terrible battle of Aughrim in July 1691. The fall of the last stronghold at Limerick followed inevitably. Under the terms of capitulation it was agreed that all French soldiers who wished might leave for France. Sarsfield and some 10,000 did so, to be followed by many thousand others in the succeeding years. The other main clause in the terms was that Irish Catholics should enjoy 'such privileges in the exercise of their religion' as they had enjoyed in the reign of Charles II.

This agreement was shamelessly repudiated by the (Protestant) parliament which met in Dublin the next year. Instead a whole series of parliamentary laws were passed which stripped Catholics of every sort of civil right and made the native Irish foreigners in their own land.

To do him justice, William wished to prevent this breach of faith but was overruled, just as in England his desire to allow more freedom for dissenters was thwarted at Westminster.

The English parliament completed the picture by destroying the Irish woollen industry in the interest of English clothiers, and forbidding the export of Irish cattle in the interest of English landowners and farmers. Many more thousands of acres passed into Protestant, mainly English hands. The century which followed the capitulation of Limerick marks the lowest point of misery and degradation in Irish history.

While the revolution can be said to have had some progressive aspects for England and Scotland, for Ireland it had none. While our heads may be, marginally, with William on the Boyne, our hearts go to the defeated at Aughrim and to Sarsfield and the 'Wild Geese' sailing to exile from Limerick. Yet the essence of the tragedy is that for Ireland there was no possible outcome which could have brought good to the Irish people: as either English colony or French province their future would have been one of exploitation and poverty. The departure of the 'Wild Geese', which has become part of Ireland's romantic mythology, is itself part of the tragedy since it robbed her of thousands of her bravest and most energetic people, the ones who in other circumstances could have been the leaders of the nation. They could satisfy their feelings by continuing the war against England on the battlefields of Europe, but Ireland was in no way benefited by these actions, as

is dramatically illustrated by Sarsfield's dying words at the battle of Louden: 'Would to God this wound had been for Ireland!'

1988

V Poems

Blow, Blow ...

Strike down,
O marble wind,
Out of the moon:

Drop your sharp tendrils
Down from the marshalled stars.

Blow into Kentish Town
From Highgate, Highbury:

Hammer ascetic tunes
On the stretched purgatory of Camden Road.

March,
An invading host,
To ravish Bloomsbury:
Or
Like the passionate breath of Linnell's guest
Leap out of Hampstead.

Numen Inest

Once, by my bedroom window,
Grew a tall cedar.
At night when the wind blew
The branches changed to arms:
Long arms that reached and mocked and pointed.

Hag's arms,
That were still the branches of a cedar.
So that I learnt,
Not knowing that I had learnt,
Why men have worshipped trees.

Years after,
All my fears forgotten,
I climbed to the top of that tree
And found a seat in the highest branches
And a view over a fair country.

Yet today
When I pass by a cedar,
Or hear the wind howling in the night,
I forget the seat, and the fair view,
And the swaying hours.
I remember only those thin, dark hands
Threatening a frightened child.

A Meditation Upon Sorcery

A cat by a leafless tree
    steadily watching.
Above it a window half open,
    black and hollow,
Where stands a cage of brown or golden birds.
Above, three storeys more of innocent windows,
    plastic, featureless.

    My eye has found the stage, but finds no players.
    Nor can imagination,
    Call-boy of the mind's theatre,
    Fill me my stage tonight.

What use for witchcraft in a world so old and rigid
That every path but one
Leads to the mountain of glass?
What need to conjure in a world so old and subtle
That every word and thought
Moves its appropriate stone?

Thin Dirge Appropriate to Sunset

I stand up in the sun

Put out my hands
over the sky's rim
to clutch to scoop
what drop remains

They come back
empty
they come back
cold
they bring back only
the night's first dew

The sun sets
cold
chilled already
before it drops back
to the numb grave

So men have stood
on Arctic ice
and watched the winter sun
and known
they would not feel
the sun again

And men to die at sunrise
have seen
the grated shadow fade
from a cell's grey walls

I know the sun
has risen a million times
rose yesterday
today
but find no comfort in analogy

'One Law for the Lion and the Ox ...'

Because Blake was a hosier's son
Instead of herding sheep in Palestine
He should have disciplined his senses
Or looked at life through yours and mine.
If he had been content with beauty
He might have woven a web of song
As passionate, soft and fanciful
As Keats or Shakespeare, and as strong.

Had he but followed out a plan
Laid down for him by friends with sense,
And been an educated man,
He'd not have lifted his eyes far hence
And seen the Golden Builders laying
Their scaffolding upon the air
In spots unsanctioned by the Muses,
Like Paddington and Golden Square.

Fascism

Seek the goddess with floating hair,
Goddess of easy death
She is not there.

Death today
Is the jackboot
And the broken face turning away.'

Once there were white petals
And the hand-scattered leaf
And time for grief.

Once we could say.
'Death came like the hour
And whispered him away.'

Now death is a whip
Or nestles sullenly
On a leather hip.

There is this gain:
That fist and thought
Growing together to an iron strength
Must now tame death at length.

So I Became ...

I remember first
the day long drive in the high trap
to buy a calf in a village dizzy with windmills.
Numbness of fingers
dividing apples and cake
and my father's voice:
'Travellers must share and share.'

The word endured
was overlaid with notions of other kinds
making one's way and privilege of class
with self esteem and rights ...
but endured.

The word grew strong and mated with other words.
Justice fair dealing
grew tall in innocence
over the world's wall.

The mills spun sunlight
out of a fleecy sky.
I dreamed no other.

Till I awoke. And a cold dry
wind and a smoke black
world filled with bent backs
and upright chimneys a world
where words meant
nothing and justice did not run
outside four walls.

Words failed to serve save

to curse in Hamlet's word or Job's
the day.

Talk of justice in a new tongue
caught the low flame. A Traveller's
Justice. Justice dividing. True
warfaring talk. My father's voice
dividing the whole world like the last apple
on the Dalham road.

So I became
What ever I now am.

Exorcism

Sleep well tonight.

Why must you lie and press
Your eyes so close against the fern-grown tank
In which your mind turns endlessly,
To and fro,
Hoping, it may be, to discover
The word again made fish.

There's nothing left to do:
No more than need be written.
O sleep well
Tonight.

Limed Spirit

Why should I care for a woman more or less
When there is so much beauty in the world?
Even though I had packed more into you
Than any one could hold,
Even suppose you are
The woman I had imagined,
You can't compete
With the cherry now beginning to waste
Its sculptured snow among the grass.
You can't compete
With spring.

But say that's cold,
for the eye only,
And shrinks from body's contact:
The sun all morning leant upon my shoulder
Far warmer than your arm.

But that's sense only,
The sun can't warm the mind:
There's wisdom enough in books
And I have wiser friends than you.

Why should I care:
You can't compete:

O valiant brain, did ever man
Reason himself from loving?

'And Then Came Spring ...'

I had lived a month in a hell
Compact of vague politeness,
Until I longed to blaspheme,
And, cursing,
To break the ring of weary kindliness.

And now, all day, in the sun
I have unrolled by bitterness like a carpet
And began to dream again.

Not the same dream
That filled the winter with restless ecstasy,
But one of an ordered life
Not too unworth the living.

My tepid hell began discovering limits.

All day
I spread myself in the moth hating sun,
But with the night my black mood comes again.

Leave

On the straw bed
I lie unsleeping.
The stove dies slow ...

Furious the train rocks
Blind over the blind shires.
Archaic Euston
Waits primly as a Bloomsbury landlady,
Welcoming the cold dawn.

In the morning
The sun climbs up out of the sea,
Peers over Essex
At Colchester's Roman wall,
Huge in my thought.

Furled on the Deben, all her fareing done,
The Isabella lies.

So far I see. But here all breaks, dissolves
Fragmentary. A tree
Becomes a voice. Fire light on a cup ...

The stove dies slow ...

And when I sleep I dream
Of you. And of the others.
But most of you.

Spring Morning

1.

Suddenly, in one moment, you look up
And the mist is gone.

And there are the ragged elms
And the rooks circling,
Solid with the voice and hidden sound no longer.
Everything guessed is known,
Everything known now seen.
The sky deepens over the coloured earth.

The sun begins to burn
And the bones to rejoice.

2.

The Orderly Sergeant,
Crying 'Rise and Shine',
Beats on the tent walls hollowly.

Limbs stretch and relax
Draining the dregs of sleep.

The cook house smoke
Coils up behind the willows.

Soon, like the first snail,
The first kit is dragged out into the sun,
Reluctantly across the beaded grass.

The sun begins to burn
And the bones to rejoice.

October 1942

The brown from the arm
And the leaf from the tree:
Summer's surface scaling away.
Now the wind under the unpegged corner
Twists the candle flame.

In Stalingrad
rain and the first frosts.

We grow perfect in the drill.
Our buttons shine.
Our boots lack nothing.

In Paris
hungry men steal rifles
fashion grenades in cellars.

We sit in the last sun,
Dreaming of summer.
It is death's dream. Stealing
Health from the heart.
Summer comes no more if we sleep now.

And the prophet said, Know ye not that
Ramoth in Gilead is ours and
we sit still and take it not out of the hand of the King of Syria?

The Backward Lookers

Now in war's winter
Their thoughts expect
A miraculous return of the year
To a time remembered.
But remembered falsely.
To a dream autumn
When leaves hung solid gold in the golden sun
And the wind slept over the fat land.

How will they bear the spring?
With boughs
Still black over the puddled earth,
With each green shoot a battle
And each birth
A hard adventure into a biting world.

How will they bear to be born,
From nightmare and dream,
Into this biting world?

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